

OFFERING HOPE & A NEW BEGINNING

Prison ministry, like all ministries, is not a single event but a process. The Church is called to make disciples, not simply converts. And that takes time.

Just recently in Magilligan a week of special meetings resulted in men hearing about Jesus, men coming to faith and others rededicating their lives. Norman and the volunteers will spend time with each one to help them understand what it really means to be a Christian. Weekly visits, Bible studies and Friday evening meetings give an opportunity for the men to grow in their faith and be encouraged and supported by other believers.

But what happens to those who will be released? How are they going to become rooted in Christ, grounded in His Word, and equipped to live a new life in the community, if they are not part of a church family?

During the past few months, as part of Aftercare, Neil organised programmes to equip Christian released prisoners to be effective disciples. As part of their Discipleship training a men's discipleship group from Hamilton Road Presbyterian came on two consecutive Thursday nights to PF to share fellowship with former prisoners. It was a huge step of faith for them.

Discipleship Group Meets Prison Fellowship

'It was a daunting task for us', says Charlie, 'as we were all required to give our 60 second testimony and prepare and deliver a short talk for ex-prisoners. The theme was "LIVE IT" to encourage the guys to share their faith with others. The two evenings went extremely well and we were really humbled, blessed and inspired by the whole experience.



Most of these ex-prisoners find it challenging to integrate into society. They find it difficult to get jobs because of their criminal records. As a result, some of them are homeless. It can even be tough for them to go to church, as it can be hard for them to have a simple conversation without disclosing their past. Some have tried going to church but haven't felt welcome, and in some cases been rejected. This is understandable, but it makes it very difficult for them to have fellowship with other believers in what we would consider to be a loving and caring church family. I believe this is why they so loved and appreciated us being there, to just spend time with them, and study God's word together.

Had we known when we started our Discipleship course in September that we would be ministering to anyone in this way, we would not have believed it and probably wouldn't have signed up to it in the first place! But this mission project touched our hearts and we felt that God really used us. I truly hope we can make this a more regular occurrence'.



Discipleship Distance Learning

Several months ago Prison Fellowship NI teamed up with Logos Ministries International who provide a Distance Learning Programme to Christians around the world. It is aimed to *help people come to grips with the Bible and the Christian faith so that they can be built up and equipped to be committed and effective disciples of Jesus Christ.* The focus is not simply providing certificate courses but to provide tools that, through the work of the Holy Spirit, will deepen spiritual understanding and lead to growth and transformed lives. We were able to avail of this free Christian Education course for released Christian prisoners.

The studies were carried out at the participant's own pace with no time limit and they were responsible for returning it to be marked by a tutor. Each study is designed to help them discover for themselves what Scripture is saying. It deals with a particular passage so that they can really learn and explore the author's meaning in that context.

The program was open to all, no matter what stage they were in their journey with Christ. There was no charge for the tuition fees, administration costs or the study materials but each learner needed to be committed to study God's Word.

R and J are two of the men who have participated in the LMI Christian Education programme.

'As I read and studied the assignments set out by the course,' says R, 'it challenged me about how I was living my life and about things that were not acceptable before God. The course has really made me aware of the importance of reading and studying the scriptures, that it is our road



map in how we should live our lives. The assignments on discipleship, backsliding, guidance and on being ready for the return of Jesus were all so helpful and eye opening to me. It has drawn me closer to God and helped me in my walk with Him'.

'I have completed two of the Logos Ministry assignments,' says J, 'and have thoroughly enjoyed the process. I come from a Bible study background but have never put it into formal practice. The discipline of studying, then answering pertinent questions to a word limit was a challenge but it encouraged me to reign my thoughts in. The feedback I received for the first assignment was very encouraging and enthused me to continue with the studies.'

I enjoyed the format of the questions which was logical and provoked thought. The associated materials helped introduce me to the subject and built a base for further reading. I liked how the application of scripture was the central theme and the course wasn't just a theological discussion. I would like to thank Logos Ministries for the opportunity to be active in these themed studies. They drive me to learn more of the scriptures but more important put those studies into practice in my daily life. The discipleship course really brought that home to me.'

21st Century Disciples

As part of their degree course at Belfast Bible College, students have the opportunity to do a block placement for a month in an organization of their choice. We had the privilege of having James and Kate during May. Why did they come? What did they do? What did they learn? Hear from James and Kate about their experiences...

'In deciding to come to Prison Fellowship I quickly realized that God has a good sense of humour! I had neither been



inside a prison nor interacted with anyone who had spent time inside a prison. I knew nothing. It was through the testimonies of those who have had experience within prison that God laid on my heart to come and serve in PF for my placement. It has genuinely been a privilege to have been a part of the team for the month. I have been blown away by the commitment of the staff, especially in how they invest so much time and energy into what they do on a daily basis. The opportunities I have been given, the places I've been to and the people I've met have been amazing. In this month alone I've been to Maghaberry and Magilligan prison four times, attended events at Stormont, prayed with men in their cell, developed a prayer resource, and even cooked for the men at Hope Works.

A number of things have made a deep impression on me. I've been deeply impacted by the time I've spent opening up God's Word. Over the last month, I led a Discipleship Bible study course entitled, 'God's Big Picture'. The course covers

the main themes of scripture, from Genesis to Revelation. Reading and understanding the scriptures is incredibly important to me. God's Word is alive and active today and to see this reality within the lives of those attending the Bible study has been truly special for me.

Within the course, there have been personal highlights, such as one of the men realizing the significance of the temple curtain being torn in two. This has helped them to see scripture as just one unfolding story which all points to God. Naturally, while doing a Bible overview course, there will undoubtedly be questions. There have been questions around the topics of the Holy Spirit, Creation and the end times. Behind each question, there is a real hunger to learn and understand what the scriptures say. I have been blessed by the time I have had with Prison Fellowship, and it is an experience which I will not forget.'

'James'

'During the past month I've been involved in various aspects of the work of PF and it's been an incredibly eye-opening experience! I've done everything from Stormont visits with Robin, Spa trips with Female Aftercare, singing in the Voices of Hope choir, to sitting in a prison cell praying with someone. No one day has been the same, and that's what I've loved so much about it.

One of the highlights for me was to sit in on a Bible study with the women in Hydebank. Before that I was taken to do some cell visits, which is where I met 'Tina'. She was so warm and welcoming, and she took Joanne and I out to see the garden and the little ducklings that they'd been looking after. We sat for a time chatting about Belfast Bible College and what it's like and then we just talked about very normal things. She then started to share her story with me, and her experiences of prison. Not only could I hear how dark it was, I could see it in her eyes. But then she said, 'Someone told me about Jesus, and something seemed to change inside.' Tina continued to tell me how she gave her life to Christ and found the light that shines, even in the deepest of darkness.

It was incredible to hear how God just met her where she was, and how He broke into her prison cell to free her from the prison she was in spiritually. To watch her eyes light up as she spoke about the hope she has in Christ was just amazing. To see and hear this change in someone is so powerful and it opened my eyes to how God isn't limited by where we're at spiritually or physically. Her prison cell didn't limit Him; He broke right in and met her there.

This is a powerful message that I've heard over and over again in my time here and it shows the real power of God at work in the hearts of those we may otherwise forget or



look down on. But God hasn't forgotten them and He's transforming lives. It's been so humbling to be able to meet people like 'Tina' and the guys from the choir and just see how God is transforming and working in their lives. It's been a privilege to be a part of that and show people they do have worth, and there is hope, and His Name is Jesus.'

'Kate'



Making Disciples in Prisons and Community

It was a really special evening to gather together in Ballymena as a team of staff and volunteers for our Volunteer Training Night to focus our attention on sharing the gospel. We partnered with Allen from Christians in Sport. He guided us in an evening focused on communicating the gospel clearly and reliably with those we serve in prison, family homes and the community.

Andy Lamberton, a volunteer in Magilligan, led us in a time of worship before Allen directed our evening on breaking down the core principles of the gospel. Around 40 of us were able to discuss and study in small groups, relaying to one another the gospel message and breaking down passages of Scripture. It was a great opportunity to think about the gospel and remind each other of specific scriptures that lead us to a clear explanation of the whole gospel message.

As we minister to those in our prisons and community, pray for each volunteer that has committed to communicating the gospel message clearly by words and actions. Pray for



wisdom in each specific setting, and that prisoners, ex-prisoners and family members will receive the true message of Hope, Forgiveness, Healing and Restoration that only Jesus can bring.

'It was good to be reminded on how to share the gospel succinctly again. Also, I was just blown away by the compassion and love for his Word that God has placed in the hearts of His people from so many different backgrounds! Totally humbling!' – Jo, Hydebank Volunteer

Grace Stewart – Volunteer Co-ordinator

A Faithful Disciple

We remember with gratitude the life of a faithful disciple Eileen Murphy, a member of the Rostrevor PF prayer group, who passed away in January. She brought the experience of many years as a missionary in South America to the group. Eileen had taught and directed for 33 years in Asuncion, Paraguay in a prestigious Anglican school and later in a Christian teachers training college, which she founded. The vision was to transform the lives of children in Paraguay by training and equipping teachers.

In both these institutions, prayer had been foundational. Besides praying for the issues directly concerning PF, as a leader herself, Eileen also saw the importance of praying for all leaders involved in prison welfare, including chaplains, and in the wider issues concerning the prison system in the UK. She will be greatly missed.

Jesus commanded the Church to *'Go and make disciples of all men, baptizing them and teaching them to follow the commandments of Christ (Mt 28:19-20)*. The Church plays a vital role in helping ex-offenders rebuild their lives and be restored back into the community. Could your church provide a ministry of 'Welcome' to those with a criminal past? Could you be part of a team to disciple ex-offenders?

