

OFFERING HOPE & A NEW BEGINNING

The Future of Our Centre

In January 1986, the Prison Fellowship trustees petitioned God for the right environment to support released prisoners. After much prayer and generous donations, Number 39 University Street was purchased as a drop-in centre.

A Central Hope

'Prison Fellowship,' says *Jonny*, 'helped me through my first lockdown.

Long before COVID-19, I sat alone in a cell, contemplating an uncertain future. A PF volunteer offered to chat. Little did I realise how influential PFNI would become.

After serving my time, I was keen to reconnect. I telephoned the office and spoke with Neil, the Aftercare Worker. I took the train to Botanic station in Belfast and walked to University Street to a bright purple door.

The PF Centre is a three-storey, mid-terrace building. I buzzed the intercom and was met by Neil who gave me a guided tour. The ground floor consisted of a large meeting area with armchairs and a dining table. A small kitchen sat at the rear with an infinite supply of mugs for tea.

Neil led me upstairs to the staff offices. I said hello and glimpsed their immense workload. He brought me to the converted attic and poured coffees while we talked. I learned about the Centre's vision and how it catered to anyone connected to prison life. He told me about the Bible studies, the Voices of Hope choir, and the drop-in meals.

The Centre soon became the focal point of PFNI's mission. It has hosted countless events like Christmas dinners and children's parties. It's been used as a base to make hampers and toy parcels. Not to mention that it hosts weekly activities and monthly prayer meetings.

During the past 10 years alone, an average of 1,089 visitors per year benefited from the PFNI's Centre. We asked some of our service-users what No 39 means to them and how they ended up there.



I wondered how a small team could undertake so much. By the end, I was eager to join them and rebuild my life with the grace of God.

The Centre lived up to the hype.

I engaged with the men on Wednesday mornings. They welcomed me without prejudice and valued my input. The staff helped nurture me during those formative months and provided invaluable support.

Then the pandemic struck. The meetings stopped, the summer excursion was cancelled, as was everything I enjoyed.

I miss interacting with the men who I regard as brothers. I crave that weekly interaction with the volunteers and staff. The Centre was and is my church, my place to worship with like-minded people who understand me.

Only God knows the future. He's provided a vaccine that could bring us together again. The Centre might reopen soon and keep its doors unlocked. That's my prayer and my central hope.'

A Wee Home-From-Home



'Prison Fellowship at 39 University Street,' **says Alastair**, 'has always felt like a wee home-from-home for me. Even when I've been away, it's been great to come back as it's always so welcoming.'

The first time I came to the Centre, I was in a vulnerable place. It was not long after my conviction and I didn't have

great thoughts in my head. I had heard about PF from my probation officer who suggested getting in contact with Neil.

I had no idea what to expect but thought there was nothing to lose from having a meeting. Neil said to come down and chat over lunch. Not knowing what this would mean, I made some sandwiches just in case.

I'll never forget it. It was such a warm experience meeting everyone. The food was prepared by an ex-prisoner who had recently become a Christian. That had such a big impact on me as he happily shared his new faith. I stayed to help with the dishes and to chat. Being at the Centre was a really warm experience, unlike my own home.

At that time my flat was filled with everything that had gone wrong, filled with self-pity and despair. It was nice to go somewhere where I felt peace and love. Every time I arrive at No 39, I still feel this sense of peace and love about the place.

Send-A-Hug

Even during the pandemic, the PF Centre has been a hive of activity.

Staff members have been busy making activity packs for the children and prisoners. They've also put together gift books for the women in Hydebank for International Women's Day and crafted gift bags with essential items for the women on the streets. 180 packs were sent to families in February and they created big hugs for their family members in prison.

'Just about everyone,' **says Claire, our Family Worker**, 'is missing someone at the minute. With lockdown restrictions in place, we all long to hug those we love.'

Virtual prison visits have many advantages, but families and prisoners miss seeing each other face-to-face. They yearn for close contact which often increases their sense of isolation and loneliness.

This led to the formation of the 'Send a Hug' project to help connect families at a time when they can't be together.

Children draw and paint a picture to offer a new type of hug. They include their own message, and both get delivered to their loved one in prison. Prisoners then send their creative hug back to their family, bringing a smile to everyone's face.

Our prayer is that this will bring comfort and strength during a time of separation. It's a visual reminder that they are remembered and loved.

When we shared Send-A-Hug with families, they were excited to get their children involved. One lady said, 'My partner will be able to look at it and know that we are thinking about him until we can give him a real hug again.'



'It took me another nine months to go back...'

Everyone who comes to the PF Centre is on a 'different journey' and for some, it takes a while to come inside the front door!

Three years into his sentence, James completed the Sycamore Tree programme with Lynne. Just before his release, he finished the Alpha course with Dean. Dean encouraged him to call into the Centre and he said he would.

'I love cycling,' *says James*, 'and would often cycle around Botanic, but I could never find the Centre even though I knew it was in University Street.'

Help Us Ensure the Future of Our Centre

'Looking back over the past 35 years,' *says Robin, our CEO*, 'we have so much to give thanks for.'

God has enabled us to use the Centre for a wide range of activities. It has been a very busy place with men and women calling-in to have a chat over a cuppa with staff and volunteers. Some come to seek help for accommodation or ask for a coat to keep them warm. Many times, they just want a place to sit in safety amongst people who care. One guest said, 'When you walk in the door it's as if you've entered a place of peace and calm.'

Many of our service-users come to the Centre with feelings of dread, not knowing how they will be received. Some have been in prison. Some are addicts or alcoholics. Many feel unwanted and have nowhere to go for help.

Yet, as a result of getting to know us, many are 'giving back' by volunteering at the Centre or with other projects. It's been wonderful to see this transformation.

Billy learned about the Centre through *Norman, our staff worker in Magilligan*. Billy doesn't just come for the activities but offers endless hours of service at the Wednesday Bible Study by making tea/coffee and cleaning up afterwards. Every Thursday afternoon he helps prepare the food and sets the table for Hope Works. Friday mornings see him arrive early to get the coffee pot on, making sure the members of the Voices of Hope choir have a good supply!



One Thursday evening, I was cycling past this building. The lights were on and I noticed that the place was packed. I looked in and thought this must be the PF Centre, but I didn't want to go inside as there was a crowd. So, I cycled on.

It took me another nine months to go back and knock the door! I remember sitting in the living room and looking at a painting on the wall. I couldn't believe it. It was one that my cellmate and I did!

Now I'm part of the choir. It's a great team and it's great to be with everyone.'

Throughout the week he cleans the centre and also gives a monthly donation.

'When it was open,' *says Billy*, 'I loved to work at the Centre and meet everyone. They made me welcome. I loved Thursday evenings, especially when we got together for games and chicken goujons. I miss coming to the Centre. I miss all the lads. I really enjoy the choir and I mean that with all my heart.'

There's no doubt that the Centre has been a vital support to those we serve. Over the years, essential maintenance has been carried out to keep it safe for our visitors. But now it requires major renovations to address our increasing numbers.

For the past 18 months, we sought God's direction. A good friend of Prison Fellowship helped prepare plans, and planning permission has been secured to take the building project forward.

We are excited about God's plans for the Centre, and we are asking you to pray and partner with us for this next stage of the journey. Please read the enclosed brochure and find out how you can invest in the ongoing work of Prison Fellowship.'

