

OFFERING HOPE & A NEW BEGINNING

Sycamore Tree Recommences

*The **Sycamore Tree** project is a victim awareness programme that explores the effects of crime on victims, offenders, and the wider community, and taking responsibility for offending actions. We asked staff and volunteers what it was like to recommence the project after two years.*

'It is 22 March 2022, and I am walking across the car park at Maghaberry prison. This is the day we commence the first Sycamore Tree course since the pandemic.

On four occasions during entry, I swipe my pass, place my hand in the reader and listen for the approving click of the turnstile giving me access. I think to myself, I hope this system still recognises me when I have to get back out!

I am inside now and discover it is still the same mix of guys: loud, quiet, nervous, talkers, those that cannot sit still. Everybody puts four spoonful's of coffee and sugar in a disposable cup and I watch the biscuits disappear, especially the chocolate ones.

I love to be here. They are great chat. Nothing beats a cuppa and even the toughest of guys softens as we talk about how much they miss their children.

Sycamore Tree is a Restorative Justice course based around Zacchaeus, or Zac, as we call him. It looks at Zac's crime, the impact it had on his victims, their family, community, his family, even himself. We call it the *Ripple Effect*.

We then look at the crimes committed by those attending and help them see the ripple effect their offending has



Jordan, Dean, Joanne and Walter

had. On the final day, we invite them to write an apology or show their remorse in some creative way towards their victim.

On session three we have a victim come to talk about her experience. We are blessed to have a spirit-filled lady sharing her story and her love for God. It is evident that God is with us and He is speaking to those in the room.

Each course consists of about twelve people. It is difficult to know what impact the sessions have had on all of them, but in my experience at least three or four men have set their mind to change.

I will never ask anyone why they are in prison, just like I would never ask you what sins you have committed. Yet, most of them will tell me something of their lives as we get to chat. It is frightening that so many crimes are committed because of alcohol abuse.

Many days as I walk back across that car park and reflect on the conversations I've had, I tell myself, 'Walter, were it not for the prayers of family and the grace of God, that would be you back there.'

Seeing God Change People

When asked to help with Sycamore Tree, I thought, "What do I know about Restorative Justice?"

As a volunteer my role is to befriend and assist participants with their workbook. Helping is as simple as giving reassurance and encouragement to participants. There are always other volunteers and course leaders on hand, so no previous experience is necessary.

Coffee and biscuits play an important role in building relationships. During a recent course, one of the participants got quite excited to see Penguin biscuits saying he hadn't had one in years! The outcome was a few minutes of hilarity as all the jokes on the packaging were read aloud. The potential barriers were gone!

Sycamore Tree helps participants understand the impact of their crimes. Few initially grasp that the impact goes beyond their immediate victim. By considering the story of Zacchaeus, we draw out the wider impact through questions like, 'Do you think Zac's family were popular in the village?'. This is a relatively easy discussion, given it is about someone else, and bravado can often be seen in the answers.



Participants then go through the same exercise relating to themselves. That's when the lightbulb comes on and change begins. It burns brightest when a victim visits to talk about their son's murder. Participants sit and listen as the victim goes through their story in detail, sharing their full pain yet how forgiveness has brought healing. The only noise you can hear is of hardened men breaking – tears are not unusual.

The course ends with an act of restitution, such as a letter or poem expressing remorse, and how the course has changed the participant. Seeing God change people is rewarding!

- Paul

Encounters on the Prison Landing

An encounter that really stood out to me on the first Sycamore Tree course took place on the prison landing one afternoon.

Dean and I were chatting one-to-one with two men about their workbooks when another man approached us and asked us what we were doing. We said that we worked for Prison Fellowship and were running a Sycamore Tree course.

'Awh, Sycamore Tree! I remember that.'

He began to tell us that he had completed the course in Hydebank about 10 years ago and was able to recite parts. He told us all about the ripple effect of crime and other parts covered in the six weeks. What stood out to me most was the clear impact the course had on him. How many of us would remember much from classes completed 10 years ago? Yet, this man was able to share so much of what he had learned in Sycamore Tree.



Even though he was unfortunately in custody again, the way in which he spoke about the course and its content made it clear that it had a significant effect on him. It is our hope and prayer that as we deliver these sessions in 2022 others will be impacted to such an extent. It would be incredible if participants are still talking about it in detail in 2032 and beyond!

Thank you for supporting us in prayer as we deliver Sycamore Tree to the men. We believe the content is life-changing and are praying for more stories of how the course impacts and influences people to change their behaviour and turn from crime.

- Joanne

Twists in the Road

Finding a parking space in University Street is never straightforward. I was running late and when I arrived at No 39 the site meeting was in full flow. Work on the roof was finished and new Velux windows were in place. The backyard had been excavated and work was underway for the extension to our ground floor.

However, like finding a parking space was not straightforward, so was the building progress - there were a few twists in the road.

The storm and waste drainage needed a redesign which has necessitated digging up the road at the back of the building. That involves permission and certification from the council and water service. The internal walls are 'crumbly' and are no longer plumb, leading to changes to how they should be plastered and finished. Sorting these things out takes time so there is concern that the project finishing date may need pushed back by several weeks. This was not what Robin and I wanted to hear. Despite our furrowed brows, Tommy, the foreman, kept smiling with his untroubled 'can do' approach.

Joy and Celebration in the House of Worship

Following a two-year break due to Covid, Monday 16th May 2022 saw the re-commencement of a week of mission in Magilligan in our new House of Worship.

Feelings ranged from joy and excitement to trepidation as I wondered what affect Covid and previous restrictions would have on attendance.

However, the meetings were not only well received but well attended, rising to our maximum numbers allowed on the Thursday night. There was no need to worry!

As we worshipped each evening, there was a real sense of joy and celebration. Different speakers shared and we sensed the presence of the Holy Spirit through the quietness and stillness, as men listened to the Gospel and various testimonies. Six men were challenged and took the booklet 'Road to Freedom.'



If you recall in the Spring News Focus, we reckoned we still had a £70,000 shortfall in funding.

Thanks to your wonderful support that shortfall is down to £30,000. However, there may be some added costs as a result of our 'twists in the road' and as yet we don't know what those figures will be.

As children, our dad often quoted Proverbs 3:5-6 and when I began to write this piece those verses came to mind. 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make straight your paths.'

I know we can trust our Heavenly Father to make straight the twists in our road.

- Gordon



Justice Minister Long at the official opening of the House of Worship, Magilligan Prison, 2021 with Ronnie Armour, Director General of NI Prison service, Governor Milling, and Prison Chaplaincy

On the Wednesday evening, W was visibly challenged as he stopped the speaker during his testimony to enquire about salvation. This cumulated in him giving his life to the Lord and on the Friday evening he shared of God's saving grace upon his life. B, a Christian who attended the meetings all week, told me of a number of men who now meet together for fellowship on the wing and friendships have been made. Praise God for all the wonderful work He is doing in Magilligan.

- Alan

Find out more about PF

Staff love to share about the work of Prison Fellowship, so when given an opportunity during the Jubilee celebrations, our CEO, Robin Scott, had the privilege to do that with royalty!

Now that restrictions are lifted, we are keen to connect with churches. If you are interested in having a PF speaker, come to your church or event, please email info@pfni.org or call the office 028 9024 3691