

OFFERING HOPE & A NEW BEGINNING

We all Need a Haven

Tired, Tired, overwhelmed, stressed, anxious, rejected?
We all need a haven.

A haven is 'a place of safety or refuge, an inlet providing shelter for small vessels, a small port in a storm.' There are several havens in the Bible: along the coast of Crete, for example. The Bible points us to one person who is 'The Haven' for all sinners in the world: Jesus Christ.

For over 30 years, Hunter and Wilma Kirk provided a haven to the 'whosoever' and have a very special friendship with Prison Fellowship Northern Ireland. The couple ran *The Haven Christian Centre* until they retired during the lockdown. They ran a coffee shop, church, and opened their doors to PFNI to pack items for Christmas Hope each year.

We have spent many a winter's night in the company of Hunter, Wilma, Christine, Rosemary, Ronnie, and Victor, to name but a few. Whether you received a gift or were involved in collecting, donating, and delivering, you would have been part of The Haven.

During the recent closure and refurbishment of the PF Centre, we became homeless ourselves. Hunter and Wilma rose to the challenge once more and offered their premises for meetings, choir practices, and the *Hands Up* food ministry. They even shared cups of coffee and scones in fellowship which we are so thankful for.

Recently, an ex-prisoner needed some extra support and was welcomed to help around the grounds of The Haven. As quickly as we painted the fences, Hunter and his team built new ones!

With a smile and glint in his eye, he said, 'Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.'



Hunter and Wilma, thank you for giving us a Haven.
Neil (Aftercare)

Bring Joy to Families

Christmas should be a joyful time of year. But sadly, this day of family celebration can break many hearts, especially for prisoners' families as it is just another painful reminder that they're separated from their mum or dad who is in prison.

So, imagine a child's excitement at receiving a beautiful gift to let them know that people care! That was the case with *Sharon's children.

'I had planned,' says *Sharon, 'to get the children board games for Christmas. We wanted 'Bop It' to play together as a family. When we came home, it was right there in their parcels! I knew it was the work of God straight away, and that it was a great way to show the kids that God is a provider.'

You can bring joy to families like Sharon's with your gift for Christmas Hope. Let them know they are loved and remembered.

*Name Changed

Bringing a Gospel Witness

I oversee the volunteer involvement in Christmas Hope from beginning to end in my role as Volunteer Co-ordinator. This includes those helping to sort, pack and distribute food and toys around the country. I manage around 100 volunteers which requires many phone calls, emails, and messages!

Christmas 2022 saw our largest number of hampers go out across Northern Ireland. I admit that I was concerned about the number of people required to distribute 564 food hampers and 720 toy parcels. It was evident to see God's hand at work as so many stepped forward to help. It was amazing to witness people willing to drive such long distances. God clearly stirred many hearts to serve men, women, and families in our care.

Packing volunteers help to sort items and pack toy parcels from our sorting centre in Templepatrick. Delivery volunteers then collect the items and drive them to their destinations.



Every year I hear such positive feedback as they meet families that are blown away at the generosity. One family just screamed by the door last year saying, "I can't believe this is for us!" Each year volunteers get so much out of the experience as they know they are bringing a very practical witness of the gospel to difficult and dark homes.

Grace

Christmas Hope Brings Hope

I'm sure you've heard it said that Christmas seems to get earlier each year. In Prison Fellowship that is actually true!

What a feeling it is to arrive at The Haven and see the hall filled to capacity with toy parcels, packed individually for each child. Before the presents leave, we take time to pray for those who will receive them, as we imagine the faces of the children as they open the present connecting them to their loved one in prison.

It takes many months of work to get to this point. As early as June, Joanne and I can be spotted walking around Smyth's Toy Shop getting inspiration. Toy lists are posted on the PFNI website and people can choose what they wish to donate to. As the toys arrive at The Haven, they are sorted according to age and gender. Our database tells us how many children are in each group and the lines keep growing! Thanks to the generosity of donors, we are able to make frequent visits to toy shops to buy any outstanding toys.

The last week before delivery is hectic! We personalise every gift bag and label it with the child's name. Each contains a toy, a Bible book, a selection box and in some cases, knitted goods which have been donated by supporters. The bags are numbered according to families and postcodes and guide the volunteers when they come to pick them up.

Christmas Hope is followed up by a visit or phone call from Family Workers after Christmas. It's a great way to connect with families who can often feel alone. We often receive comments like, 'they're great toys and it's a big help financially,' or, 'it means a lot that people are thinking of us.'

One mum said with tears in her eyes, 'they missed their dad at Christmas and were so happy when they got the present from him. It made him feel closer.'

Thank you to all who make this possible

Claire



A Real Team Effort

For Christmas Hope, my role changes from Family Worker to overseeing all things related to our food hampers. This begins in September with ordering boxes and ends with tidying the sheds we use during our two months at The Haven including everything in between!

Those months of practicalities involve workspace set up and sorting through every bag of food we receive. With the help of volunteers, we check for damaged or out-of-date groceries then record the good items on our stock sheets. We need to think of storage as we juggle food intake alongside the building of the boxes, which takes around a week.

Timing everything can be tricky especially when it comes to food items. The earlier it arrives the better. Keeping ahead with our food count allows for some wriggle room should something unexpected happen. The second biggest challenge is finding a home for items we cannot use! We never waste anything that is in date, but it does create a lot of additional work at an already busy time.

Who Would Want to go to Prison for Free?

As part of my church outreach, I signed up to help with Prison Fellowship's Football Programme during the summer in Hydebank Wood. It was my first time, and I hadn't met any of the other volunteers, though it wasn't long before the banter started, and we got on well as a team.

Each Tuesday evening started with a few games of football with around 15 young guys. We stopped midway for oranges and Jaffa cakes, listened to a testimony from one of the team of how their faith impacted their lives and finished with a few more games of football.

Going into Hydebank was a bit surreal at the beginning. The process involved many checks and gates to enter, but people were very helpful in getting us through the processes. The next challenge was getting to know the guys in prison. It was awkward at first, but by the end of the six weeks, we had created good relationships and were sharing plenty of jokes. It was great to see the young men listen more each week to the testimonies.

I enjoyed the experience as I had the chance to visit the guys in prison. The look on their faces when they realised we were volunteering and not getting paid to be there! They were like, *'Who would want to go to prison for free?!'* Overall, I think the guys really took to us as an evangelism team. Giving up our time to be there with them really showed an impact on who Jesus is and how we can all have Him in our lives.



Everything we do regarding Christmas Hope, starting with our team meeting in May until the last hamper is handed to a Delivery Volunteer in December, is put together with so much care, love, and prayer. It is our desire that those who receive a hamper will know how much thought and effort goes into each one.

Christmas Hope is only made possible by the hard work of our volunteers and the generosity of supporters. If you are interested in learning more about how you can get involved, **contact the PF office at 028 9024 3691.**

Sandra

I was challenged that there are people we haven't thought about who need to be given time and help as they may not get a lot from their peers. Showing kindness can be done in simple acts of service like playing 'footy' for an hour. The goal is to be less judgemental of people's backgrounds and more about listening to where their stories might go in the future. It was a great opportunity to learn from different sides of life and know that the people who do bad things can be good people too.

Frank

