

## OFFERING HOPE & A NEW BEGINNING

### The Joy of Generosity

Prison Fellowship Northern Ireland saw significant changes during 2023.

We moved back into the refurbished centre on University Street, and although not fully functional, we welcomed a Salt sports team from America in May. They gave a prayer walk to ask God's blessing on No. 39. Then, in June, 40+ members of Castlereagh Fellowship gathered at the Centre for an evening of praise and to hear PF staff share about their ministries.

Restorative Justice work continued to grow with three Sycamore Tree courses running simultaneously in each of the prisons. We welcomed Michael Cochrane to our staff as he joined Dean in Maghaberry as a Prison Worker. We have much to be thankful for, not least to two Board members, Sydney Cairns and Stuart Nelson, who have stepped back after many combined years of faithful service. Stuart will remain a vital source of legal advice and we give thanks to both men.

Christmas is almost upon us, piling financial and emotional pressure on many. Tragic wars in Ukraine, Israel and Gaza, and the cost-of-living crisis could easily overwhelm us, making us feel fearful and hopeless.

However, Christmas reminds us that God came 'to dwell among us' in the person of Jesus whose perfect life led to His death and glorious resurrection. So, despite overwhelming odds, we have real hope for the future. This is not a Christmas fairy tale but a profound truth.

The theme for the Winter News Focus is '**Giving**'. Christmas Hope could not happen without your amazing generosity, whether that is donating groceries or finance,



joining our staff in Templepatrick to help with packing and deliveries, or praying for God's guidance and protection.

PFNI's preparations for Christmas Hope have been ongoing since summer and culminate in the frenetic weeks of November and December. Parcels and hampers are soon to be delivered to needy families and that need continues to increase. By giving your help, support and prayers, that demand gets fulfilled and acts as a practical demonstration of the profound and certain hope we have in Jesus Christ. Thank you.

We face challenges ahead and would value your prayers for the appointment of new staff at the Centre, planning Family work and the need for new Board members. Please remember us and those we serve in 2024, visit our website for latest news and announcements [www.pfni.org](http://www.pfni.org)

#### Gordon McIlroy (Chairman)

When we think of *giving*, money comes to mind! Giving sacrificially and cheerfully of our finances is part of our worship. It's not something we have to do; it's something we get to do joyfully in response to God blessing us. At PF, we are so thankful for everyone who supports us in this way and to those who help in our programmes, who pray for the work and who showcase God's love and goodness to others.



## A Congregation Gets Involved!

'Being Transformed' is the theme for this year's Presbyterian Women's groups in Ireland and the work of Prison Fellowship fits very well into this theme.

Greenwell Street Presbyterian Church has previously been involved in the work of PFNI through our minister and his wife who delivered Christmas hampers and toys to families. We have had various representatives from PF speaking at midweek meetings including John Porter who volunteers.

In September, John came to speak and sing at the opening meeting of our PW. Several people commented that they hadn't fully understood the importance of supporting families of prisoners and the effect that this could have on the lives of husbands, wives, children, and the wider family circle.

Many of the ladies were challenged by what they heard and were motivated to pray for the work and contribute

to the Christmas Hope project by collecting groceries to build a hamper from the PW. Some PW members also attended the weekly 'Hobby Huddle' which met the following morning. The chat centred on what they had heard and resulted in many more people wanting to get involved.

Boxes were put in the church vestibule to receive donations of groceries and Christmas Hope leaflets were circulated. But the support didn't stop there! As usual, the people of Greenwell Street were extremely generous and what started as a PW effort became a congregation-wide endeavour. This resulted in a carload of food being delivered a few weeks later to the base at Templepatrick.

The PW ladies have certainly been transformed by this act of giving and we pray that lives will be transformed by receiving hampers through Christmas Hope.

**Pamela**



## Giving Time to Serve Others

It's wonderful to be a part of Prison Fellowship again! Previously employed by PF, I returned as a volunteer to support staff running the six-week Sycamore Tree programme in Magilligan prison. The course is designed to address the far-reaching consequences of crime.

PF staff and volunteers work together as a team to deliver the programme. Each group of men come with different attitudes and challenges, but gradually we make connections and focus on where help is needed. I particularly enjoy coming alongside and helping those with literacy problems. Although sifting through past offences is not an easy process and working on a one-to-one basis means hearing shocking stories, we always show support and respect.

Midway through the course, a victim of crime shares their story. While this can be uncomfortable listening, it really makes the greatest impact on hearts and minds. Ultimately, this person speaks about their forgiveness of the offender. It's never the intention to add to anyone's guilt, but rather to convey a final positive message that healing and restoration are possible for both victim and perpetrator. Many of the men thank the person telling their story with handshakes and even hugs.



**Paul, Claire, June & Ken.**

On the last day's act of restitution, evidence of change is seen in the paintings, poems and letters shared with the group and prison staff. Some have the courage to read aloud words of regret, remorse, and sorrow about what led them to prison. Others talk of a resolve never to return to 'a wasted life of crime.'

What meant so much to me was a quiet 'thank you Miss' from a man who was unable to read or write. This was unexpected, especially since he had been so withdrawn at the beginning. Although Sycamore Tree is not an evangelistic programme, it provides many opportunities to speak about Jesus. It's impossible to miss the message of salvation in the story of Zac! And when the course has ended, PF staff are delighted to provide follow-up to anyone who is interested.

**June**



## Being Available to Pray

Last month, a new PF prayer group started in Moneyreagh. We asked **Margaret** why she wanted to help prisoners' families and how she got involved with PF.

'As a Christian, I've always had an interest in the well-being and care of those spending time in prison and the broken family members whose lives have been impacted by their crime. In the early 80's, I volunteered to work with young mums whose partners had committed politically motivated crimes. I was working part time so Wednesday became my day for *Hope House*. We shared craft skills together. Sometimes they taught me things and sometimes I taught them and we developed close relationships. I remember cooking with them and talking about nutrition and economical ways to feed your kids... not sure they were ever sold on the idea of cooking from scratch! Sadly, Hope House had to close.

Following that, I heard a Deaconess in the Presbyterian Church speaking about her prison visiting work. Tears ran down my face as she shared about a young man whose grandmother was dying. He pleaded with Linda to help organise for him to see her. Sometimes God allows us to share in the things that break His heart so we are useful in His service. God has given me a heart for His people even when they have 'broken all the rules'. God wants them to have a second chance and so do I.



Margaret & Ali

I've been supporting Prison Fellowship's Christmas Hope appeal for a few years by buying groceries, and more recently, by giving a donation towards the work. My faithful prayer partner May Turner and I have had an interest since a close friend, Neil Jackson, works for PFNI. Voices of Hope choir came to several of our 'Time Out' meetings and they have been lovely times of blessing to us and to Ali and the choir. Recently, God spoke into my heart about being part of a prayer group. I'm not a driver, and I thought, if I am going to be part of a prayer group, I should open my own home and create a place where others who have a heart for this work can be a part of that ministry.

Our first meeting was on 21st November, and it was so precious. A PF staff member joined us and we became more aware of all aspects of the work and the part we can play by just being available to pray . . . not only when we meet, but every day.'

## 'We were able to be a part of something bigger'

How do you decide who to send your Christmas cards to?

Most of us send Christmas cards to people we know, but that's not the case with Prison Fellowship! For over 15 years, members from Woodlands Presbyterian Church have had an annual card-signing evening to send cards to men and women in prison, their families and those released.

Each year, 30+ people gather on a Tuesday evening in November to personally handwrite over 2000 cards. It has become a must-visit event with delicious apple pie to finish!

This year, **Chloe Eager**, the Co-Ordinator of Youth Ministry, was delighted that five of the young people gave up their time to help.

This was a fantastic way to get the new generation to focus on others and practice selflessness. Mainly motivated by the desire to make a positive impact in the Christmas season, they were excited to be involved and encouraged others by their presence and enthusiasm.

As one young person said: 'It was meaningful as we were able to be a part of something bigger, making us think about other people more.' Another shared: 'It was really good to get to be a small part of someone's Christmas, sharing the love of Jesus.'

