

“The Church's Participation in Prison Reform”
A Keynote Speech at the 10th Harold Hood Memorial Lecture
Presented on 24 May 2023, by Dr Chijioke Nwalozie
De Montfort University, Leicester, UK.

Greetings

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Before we begin, special thanks go to the Prison Advice and Care Trust (PACT) for the invitation to present a keynote speech at the 10th Sir Harold Hood Memorial Lecture here at Maria Fidelis Catholic School, Camden, London. The conspicuous presence of the Hood family in our midst is highly appreciated. Finally, the attendance of all and sundry is sincerely acknowledged.

This special occasion provides an opportunity to acknowledge the significant contributions of Sir Harold Hood, a devout Catholic Christian who contributed in no small measure to prison reform in this country. His legacy remains evergreen, especially with this annual lecture in his memory. May he continue to rest in the peace of Christ, Amen.

Introduction

This keynote speech is titled "The Church's Participation in Prison Reform." The aim is to explore some of the good things the Church has done so far in this country and abroad and identify what the Church can do in future regarding prison reform. For this paper, we refer to the Church as the members of the Christian faith outside the prison (in the community) and inside the prison (chaplaincy). There may be occasions to use specific examples to bolster some points or clarify issues. Before all that, let us describe or explain what prison reform means, which has given rise to this keynote speech. First let us consider the six-letter word - prison.

Prison

Presumably, everyone here knows what a prison is, but far from presumption, the prison is a criminal justice institution or establishment that keeps or remands a person or persons whom the courts have found guilty and subsequently sentenced for committing a crime. However, on rare or even far fewer occasions where justice may have been miscarried, the prison still houses people who may not have committed any crime. Nevertheless, they are incapacitated because the courts have committed them to jail. The latter is contrary to the purpose of the prison estate. Hence it is sad and against human rights that such a situation(s) can occur in developed and developing societies worldwide. That in part, suggests why we have more people in prison. For example, data reveal that about one-fifth of the prison population in the United Kingdom is generally unconvicted or unsentenced. In India, more than two-thirds of those in custody are pretrial detainees (Coyle, 2023)—it is the same narrative in Nigeria with 70% of the inmates awaiting trial, which is the largest in Africa (Ajah, 2022).

Any visitor to any public prison in England/Wales will see at the wall or notice board before the gate lodge this statement which reads: "His Majesty's Prison (HMP) serves the public by keeping in custody those committed by the courts. Our duty is to look after them with humanity and help them lead law-abiding and useful lives in custody and after release." That is the ideal organisational mission statement and practice to achieve the desired result, but has it always been the approach in practice? Ask prisoners, and they will give far more negative answers than positive ones depending on their experiences. Many officers try their best to work with prisoners who serve their time. However, many of the positive experiences' prisoners

give relate to the chaplaincy/chaplain who may have helped them navigate difficult times and moments like bereavement, divorce, serious ill-health of a family member, or attempted suicide.

Usually, there are divided opinions from academic criminologists, criminal justice practitioners, politicians, the media, and indeed the public, whether the prison works in rehabilitating offenders hence the usual call for its reform. The word reform has a Latin origin – *reformo*, which means to form again, mould anew. It is to improve on what is or has been, which is no longer fit for purpose. According to the Concise Oxford English Dictionary (2012: 1209), reform means to make changes in (something, especially an institution or practice) in order to improve it.

Prison Reform

Prison reform is an ongoing process to improve the conditions of all those locked up in the prison estate (awaiting trials and those already convicted). It extends to making the penal system an effective mechanism that can bring veritable alternatives to imprisonment (Harris & Conley, 2019). Prison reform is not a one-off exercise but an extant process as long as the prison establishment or institution exists.

In every century or period, prison reform is always flagged by interested stakeholders who have the common good of society and human interest at heart. There are many prison reformers that history can recall. We remember the likes of the 18th century Utilitarian philosophers and criminologists - Jeremy Bentham, the British who wanted to build an ideal prison, "Panopticon", which never saw the light of day. He and his colleague, the Italian Cesare Beccaria, talked extensively about the evil inherent in punishment and or imprisonment, which can morally be acceptable if only to achieve a higher good of preventing (deterrence) future offending.

We also acknowledge reformers like John Howard, Elizabeth Fry, Alexander Patterson, Sir Harrold Hood, and others who cannot be mentioned for want of space and time. Foucault (1975), the French philosopher and penal reformer through his writings had argued that in the worst of offences, such as murder, there is one thing worthy of respect when punishing an offender, and that is his 'humanity'. That is why Foucault had been an arch-critic of the prison, which he often called a penitentiary, which has more to do with discipline and punishment than reform. From political thinking, incapacitating a criminal in prison confinement reduces crime, but that is seemingly untrue or rather open to debate. However, the abolitionist or moralist school of thought would think that the way to deal with criminals is to provide non-punitive sanctions that do not tend to harm the criminal (Boonin, 2008). That chimes with Foucault's argument.

The end of the 19th century gave way to the modern penal policy in the United Kingdom, whereby the Victorian prison system underwent reform. Not only are prisons conceived as punitive places, but the prison system must also consider the needs and benefits of prisoners' rehabilitation (UK Parliament, 2023). A few landmark reforms happened in England/Wales in the early and mid-20th century, such that young offenders are treated differently from adult offenders. For example, The Prevention of Crime Act of 1908 created separate institutions for offenders under the age of 21. Also, the Criminal Justice (CJS) Act 1948 abolished penal servitude, hard labour and flogging (UK Parliament, 2023). Moran et al. (n.d) argue that the consistent opinion of reformers like the earlier mentioned Alexander Patterson (1884-1947)

that "men are sent to prison as punishment., not for punishment" may have hugely helped in the enactment of the CJS Act 1948.

In the 21st century, the Norwegian model, arguably the best prison system in the world, treats offenders to bring about reform and rehabilitation and avoid much of repeat offending. The prison places in Norway are like ordinary furnished flats people live in their homes. Family can visit the inmates and spend weekends, and inmates can also visit family to do the same. The prisons there are not crowded, and the ratio of officers per prisoner is 1:2 or 1:3 maximum since the 1990s (Berlioz, 2019). Their recidivism rate is 20% (Inslee, 2022) – arguably the lowest worldwide.

The prison staff are well trained in the liberal arts and social sciences. They behave like social workers to the prison inmates and work very closely with them. They consistently suggest that merely locking up people in prison to deny their freedom is enough punishment. Therefore, the entire staff treat every prisoner with humanity and respect in the hope that the Norwegian society needs them back to help in nation-building, and rightly so - it has been working for them. The Norwegian prison system had Christian beginnings and ethos where the chaplains treated offending from the point of view of sin and forgiveness (Berlioz, 2019).

In the early years of being a prison chaplain and charity director in Nigeria, we thought prison reform was a somewhat one-off call on the government to improve prison conditions. However, much later, there was the realisation that the prison, and indeed prisons, must undergo much-needed reforms from time to time as the need arises. Reform should be and remain a maintenance culture of the prison institution: inmates, staff, prison regimes, physical structures and equipment. The reform must happen for the prison estate to remain an investor in people and a habitable place where offenders are kept with dignity and humanity, thus preserving their inalienable human rights. Or do prisoners have no rights after committing crimes? Of course, they have human rights like us all. It might be that some people listening to this speech tonight might disagree with the rights of prisoners because the person who committed an indictable offence like rape or murder should be treated inhumanely and allowed to rot away in prison, or better still, to see that "justice is done", the offender should face the death penalty, if that was to be possible now in this country or Europe at large. Of course, the European continent is against capital punishment, and the Church may have influenced this.

The Church's Participation in Prison Reform

The Church's participation in prison reform is the missionary call of Jesus Christ to his disciples (all the baptised in Christ). This ministry and apostolate to prisoners is a legitimate call enshrined in Sacred Scripture, especially what we can see and read from the New Testament. For example, The Letter to the Hebrews 13: 3 says: "Keep in mind those who are in prison, as though you are in prison with them." By implication, feel with them, empathise with them, talk to them, speak for them, and support them in any way possible to transform their broken lives and turn around their prison situation into a better experience. It is little wonder that the Lord Jesus Christ reminds us of one of the eschatological provisos: "I was in prison, and you came to see me" (Matt 25: 36). That goes to show that the Lord is very mindful of the plight of the prisoner, such that any ill or good treatment to a prisoner is a treatment meted out to Jesus Christ, the Lord. Emphatically he maintains: "In truth, I tell you, in so far as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you neglected to do it to me" (Matt: 25: 45). So, the Church must carry out the mission and divine mandate of its founder, Jesus Christ.

When prisoners are poorly treated, the Church must act as a critical stakeholder and vanguard of prison reform. That was what we did in Owerri, Nigeria. We ran both chaplaincy and charity. The chaplaincy provided prisoners with the Word of God and Sacraments. The Prison Support Services Team positively impacted prisoners' lives in the following areas: medical, legal, home mediation conflict resolution and other welfare services because the government could not do much. The charity remains serving prisoners in Owerri, Southeast of Nigeria, and we try to raise funds to support their work. We are currently providing computers for prisoner education there.

The Church's mission and apostolate to prisoners are not different from that of her Master and Lord Jesus Christ. When Christ visited a Jewish Synagogue, he made a remarkable impression by preaching to protect the vulnerable, including prisoners. We can see that exemplified in the gospel according to Luke 4:18-19, where he says: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

We should not forget the early Church's role in prison reform post-resurrection. On hearing that Herod, who killed the apostle James, the brother of John, had arrested and imprisoned Peter, the Church earnestly prayed to God on Peter's behalf (See Acts, 12:2-5), which brought about his release from prison. Prayer and good works must be carried along in the Church's participation in prison reform.

From time to time, the Church as Mater et Magistra (mother and teacher) continues to raise her voice for prison reform through the competent ecclesiastical authorities. In 2016, during the Holy Year of Mercy, specifically on the Jubilee of prisoners, Pope Francis, the Vicar of Christ on earth, and Servus Servorum Dei (Servant of the Servants of God) appealed to different governments worldwide to grant an act of clemency to prisoners. The Pope also stressed, "in favour of improving the living conditions in prisons throughout the world, that the human dignity of detainees is fully respected." He reflected on "the need for a criminal justice system that is not exclusively punitive, but open to hope and the prospect of reintegrating the offender into society" (Vatican News, 2022).

During the passage of the Prison and Courts Bill, the Catholic Liaison Bishop for the Prisons in England and Wales, said: "Prisons should never exist purely to punish offenders. It is extremely welcome that the most significant reform of UK prison law for over 50 years is introducing a statutory duty for prisons to provide reform, rehabilitation, and preparation for life outside. We have been engaging closely with this legislation, bringing the Church's vision and experience to the debate" (Moth, 2017). The Bishop further states: "In particular, we are highlighting the importance of regular contact with families, good access to chaplaincy, and a prevailing standard of decency within prison walls. All of this is essential to rehabilitation and to respecting the dignity of those in prison – a dignity which is never lost despite what crimes may have been committed." (Moth, 2017). The Church's reaction and response to matters affecting the plight of the prisoners is to bring hope to the hopeless, restore human dignity, and reassure them that their broken lives can be fixed and that there will be light at the end of the tunnel.

For England and Wales, there is a Ministry of Justice (2023) prison population projection signalling an accelerated rise to 94,400 by March 2025 and another projection of 93,100 to 106,300 by March 2027. It is suggested that employing an additional 23,400 police officers will eventually bring about more arrests and charges, thus leading to more imprisonments. Another significant determinant of this projection is the sentencing policy change of keeping the most serious criminals incapacitated for a protracted period in prison. Of course, the prisons in this country are overcrowded. Hence some cells can house two people. It contributed to the killing of an Asian descent lad Zahid Mubarek, at Feltham Young Offenders Institute, London. He was killed by Robert Stewart, a white supremacist and fascist fellow. Prison overcrowding remains an inhibition to prison reform across the world's prisons. If it is not dealt with appropriately, prison reform becomes a conundrum. "It is a condition that aggravates the relationships among inmates, and which makes the work of prison personnel, often victims of aggression, even more difficult. "Overcrowding means greater difficulty in guaranteeing security and greater difficulty in proposing activities that facilitate paths to rehabilitation" (National Catholic Reporter, 2022).

The face of the Church we see in the prison is primarily the chaplaincy, but in concrete terms, the person of the chaplain. That is why the critical nature of chaplaincy is such that it is the soul, conscience and moral compass of the prison (Todd & Tipton, 2011: 18). According to the Prison Rules (1999) and Prison Service Order (PSO) 4550 of England/Wales, chaplaincy is to support and serve the religious needs of the prison population. The chaplain is the driver of that support (Ministry of Justice, 2021).

The Church's prominent presence in prison and involvement in its reform is to help bring the gospel message of Christ (Love, mercy, compassion, liberation and forgiveness) to those locked behind bars. They are also children of Abraham and should be saved too. Christ came to seek out the lost so that he may save them (Lk, 19:10). Since faith comes from hearing, the prisoner who hears Christ's consoling and healing words aims to turn to a new leaf: such desire and later decision to desist from offending bring about reform and rehabilitation. We get stories from prisoners willing to tell us that they have decided to leave the life of crime and become valuable and responsible members of their families, communities, and the country. One prisoner wrote in front of the chaplaincy office at Stocken prison, "Do not judge me by my past because I am no longer there." That statement is one of the many fruitful outcomes of the prisoner-chaplaincy experience. Of course, the prisoners know that the chaplains and chaplaincy are not judgemental of their behaviours but welcome them to experience the love and mercy of Christ the Saviour.

It is not easy to quantify what the chaplain or chaplaincy does for prisoners in statistical terms to measure outcomes. According to a Prison Governor (cited in Todd & Tipton, 2011: 28): "We live in a world of delivery and budgets, and therefore give me the tangible, measurable, and I am happy. I think it comes down to "What [key performance target] KPT does the chaplaincy deliver?" That is very hard to quantify as it is the qualitative stuff that lies underneath that is important here and which we shouldn't dismiss." Without prisoner-free access to chaplaincy, prison reform and prisoner rehabilitation remain a mirage. In the prison chaplaincy, prisoners are taught the doctrines of their religious denominations, are baptised, make their first communion, receive confirmation, get married in a church, have bad news broken to them, and receive bereavement counselling.

It is crucial to note that the chaplain is available to offer a listening ear to any prisoner who wants to engage in a talk. Prisoners cherish this openness to talk confidentially to a chaplain.

It is psychologically and spiritually therapeutic, which brings relief and succour to the hopeless and helpless prisoner whose remaining option might be suicide. According to a Prisoner (2010): “I find that when I am at my lowest ebb or when I have situations that I am not comfortable speaking to the screws or cons about because of trust issues with cons and insensitivity with officers; I always know that there is someone in the chapel I can talk to” (cited in Todd & Tipton, 2011: 29).

Chaplaincy remains an indispensable part of the prison establishment and an essential partway of prison reform and prisoner rehabilitation. Prisoners know that very well and have publicly spoken out: For example: "I suppose at the end of the day this place and the chaplains make the prison a less painful place, you know, like there is less hurt as a result of them being here" (Prisoner, 2010 in Todd & Tipton, 2011: 29).

In addition, and by extension, other charities and voluntary organisations have inherent core Christian ethos and values. They also do enormous and remarkable work to support prison reform and the rehabilitation of prisoners. The PACT is one such, and their website has many good stories. They have positively touched the lives of many prisoners, ex-prisoners and their families. Prisoners and former prisoners have testified to that on various occasions.

Moreover, the Prison Fellowship's Sycamore Tree Project (Victim Awareness) is restoratively oriented and has turned round the broken lives of prison inmates (Christians and non-Christians alike). What about the Kairos and many more Christian charities doing fantastic work in the prisons? They are helping to change lives positively in an unquantifiable way. With the above examples, the Church and its different charities/voluntary organisations are doing plenty of good jobs supporting and realising the much-needed prison reform.

Final thoughts & the ways forward

However, the Church remains a formidable force in the overall progress of the human person and society, especially in her unique participation in prison reform, mainly driven by the gospel message and mission of Jesus Christ. Without a doubt, the Church can do more. The Church can positively influence penal policies by encouraging more lay members to volunteer as Independent Monitoring Board (IMB) Members because their reports and recommendations cannot be swept under the carpet. Also, the Church should lobby to have representations of people with human hearts and faces in the Parole Board when deciding the fate of a prisoner for early release or on license. Finally, the Church must relentlessly speak out whenever the prisoner's plight is reduced to inhuman conditions.

Thank you for listening.

References

- Ajah, B.O. (2022) Nigeria Has Too Many Prison Inmates Awaiting Trial: Technology Could Achieve Swifter Justice, <https://theconversation.com/nigeria-has-too-many-prison-inmates-awaiting-trial-technology-could-achieve-swifter-justice-193237>, Accessed 23 May 2023.
- Berlioz, D. (2019) We Are More Like Social Workers than Guards, https://www.etui.org/sites/default/files/Hesamag_19_EN-23-26.pdf, Accessed 23 May 2023.
- Boonin, D. (2008) *The Problem of Punishment*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Cartabia, M. (2022) “Pope on Prisons: No Inmate Should Ever be Deprived of Hope”,

National Catholic Reporter, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/justice/pope-prisons-no-inmate-should-ever-be-deprived-hope>, Accessed 8 May 2023.

Concise Oxford English Dictionary (2012), Edited by A Stephenson & M. Waite, 12th Edition, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Coyle, A.G. (2023) "Prison" in Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/prison>, Accessed 23 May 2023.

Foucault, M. (1975) Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, United Kingdom, Penguin Social Sciences.

Harris, D. & Conley, K. (2019). The US Prison System and Prison Life. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Essential Library. pp. 8–9. ISBN 9781532119224.
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1138135/Prison Population Projections 2022 to 2027.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1138135/Prison_Population_Projections_2022_to_2027.pdf), Accessed 14 May 2023.

Inslee, J. (2022) How Norwegian Prisons Prepare Inmates to Become Better Neighbors, <https://medium.com/wagovernor/how-norwegian-prisons-prepare-inmates-to-become-better-neighbors->, Accessed 23, May 2023.

Ministry of Justice (2021) Equality: Question for the Ministry of Justice, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-02-10/HL13233>, Accessed 8 May 2023.

Ministry of Justice (2023) Prison Population Projections 2022 to 2027, England and Wales, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1138135/Prison Population Projections 2022 to 2027.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1138135/Prison_Population_Projections_2022_to_2027.pdf), Accessed 14 May 2023.

Moran, D. Turner, J. & Arnold, H. (n.d) Soldiering On? The Prison-Military Complex and Ex-Military Personnel as Prison Officers: Transition, Rehabilitation and Prison Reform, Forthcoming in the Howard Journal of Crime and Justice.

Moth, R. (2017) The Catholic Church, Bishops Conference of England & Wales, Bishop Richard Moth on the Prisons and Courts Bill, <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/bishop-richard-moth-on-the-prisons-and-courts-bill/>, Accessed 8 May 2023.

Sturge, G. (2022) UK Prison Population Statistics, House of Commons Library.

Todd, A, & Tipton, L. (2011) The Role and Contribution of a Multi-Faith Prison Chaplaincy to the Contemporary Prison Service, Final Report, Produced by the Cardiff Centre for Chaplaincy Studies Research.

UK Parliament, (2023) Reforming Prisons, Reforming Prisoners, <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/research/olympic-britain/crime-and-defence/reforming-prisons-reforming-prisoners/>, Accessed 8 May 2023.

Vatican New, (2022) Pope asks World Leaders for Clemency for Prisoners in Run-up to Christmas. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-12/pope-letter-world-leaders-pardon-prisoners-christmas.html#:~:text=prisons->, Accessed 8 May 2023.