



# CATHOLIC PRISON CHAPLAINCY

## IN NEW ZEALAND

**Promoting the Integrated  
Integrated Human Development  
8 November 2019**

Veronica Casey  
[vcasey@nzcbc.org.nz](mailto:vcasey@nzcbc.org.nz)

**Kei te mihi ki te Runga Rawa**  
**Kei te mihi ki te whenua**  
**Kei te mihi ki a ratou ma**  
**Kei te mihi ki a tatou katoa**  
**Haumi e, hui e, taiki e.**

Acknowledging the Most High  
the land  
those who have died  
and us who are living  
let us gather and be united at this time.

Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa  
Greetings, greeting, greetings to you all.

I come to this Hui from New Zealand: a small country in the Pacific – 18,533 kms from Rome, with a population of approximately five million people from a wide range of nationalities.

New Zealand is best known for its beauty, its nuclear free policy, it's All Blacks, earthquakes and more recently the tragic mosque shootings.

Prison chaplaincy in New Zealand is a wholly ecumenical service governed by Prison Chaplaincy New Zealand, which is a trust board comprised of members of the mainstream Trinitarian churches, and representatives of the Council of Pentecostal Churches, and the Māori Council of Churches. The trust board holds a contract with the Department of Corrections to provide religious and spiritual services to all in New Zealand prisons. In turn the trust board subcontracts with the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference (NZCBC) to provide Catholic chaplaincy services. The service is provided by paid chaplains and by approximately 1400 volunteers.

Prison Chaplaincy New Zealand is responsible for determining the suitability of a chaplain to have access to the prison and can, in conjunction with the Senior Catholic Chaplain and the Diocese, remove that access on grounds of unsuitability or misconduct.

The NZCBC employs a Senior Catholic Chaplain to provide pastoral care and leadership to the Catholic chaplains and to work closely with the chief executive and management of Prison Chaplaincy Service.

At a management level the Senior Catholic Chaplain works closely with the Chief Executive of the Prison Chaplaincy Service, is a member of the management team and attends board meetings. The success of this arrangement is based on sound healthy relationships between the various parties and learning to work with differences.

Catholic chaplains are employed by their respective diocese and charged with representing their bishop in their ministry. The recruitment process is a joint one between the diocese, the Senior Catholic Chaplain and Prison Chaplaincy New Zealand. Similarly, the Senior Catholic Chaplain is a member of the recruitment team for Prison Chaplaincy Service chaplains. This is a relatively new initiative as the working relationships in the ecumenical service continue to develop.

The Catholic chaplaincy is a lay ministry with no consecrated Religious or ordained ministers in the roles. Each chaplain has contact with a priest who can be called on to celebrate Mass or for reconciliation.

Our prisons cannot and should not be compared with those of less affluent countries. The chaplains are not required to bring food, medicines and other necessities to those in prison. However, the conditions of loneliness, isolation, separation, worthlessness and desolation of the soul are prevalent. Prisons are a place of hopelessness, despair, revenge and division. Chaplains offer a safe, confidential and caring ministry, bringing hope that can transform lives into what can otherwise be a toxic environment. The presence of prison chaplains in prisons is protected by legislation, as the department of Corrections is required to provide for spiritual services for prisoners.

New Zealand was colonised by the British in 1840, approximately 500 years after the Māori people arrived from Eastern Polynesia and had developed a distinct Māori culture centred on kinship links and connection with the land. As a means of settling in peace, the Treaty of Waitangi was signed in 1840 between Māori chiefs and the British Crown, and includes three principles of partnership, participation and protection, requiring the Government to act reasonably and in good faith towards Māori, making the Government responsible for helping to address grievances, establishing equality, and the principle that all New Zealanders are equal under the law.

There are 18 prisons in New Zealand: 17 public prisons, 14 of which are for men and three for women. There is one private male prison run by Serco.

The first recorded prisons were in 1841 and reported as being very basic constructions, with one being a tent with difficult prisoners being kept in irons. The prisoners were largely engaged in hard labour, building the infrastructure for New Zealand.

Records show that the Government from 1842 required reporting of how religious observance was maintained, but the application of this was inconsistent and there was little conformity to the requirement.

In 1868 a Royal Commission on prisons expressed awareness about the weaknesses and inconsistencies that could arise where local clergy were appointed as prison chaplains, and stated that it was prepared to advocate for the development of a centralised prison chaplaincy service, but it was not until 1953 that this intention was realised. The prisons continued to be served on a voluntary basis by the local clergy, with Sunday service attendance being compulsory for all prisoners, who were restricted to attend the service only of their denomination. Between 1909 and 1949 the relationship between State and Church administration entered a new phase after legislation provided a statutory basis for the existence of officially appointed chaplains for the first time.

The influence of key Christian politicians and public servants was instrumental in recognising the need for an appropriate structural entity to be formed to provide oversight of the Prison Chaplaincy movement. As there was no national church in New Zealand this required the Churches to come together as the Cabinet of the day would not agree to any hint that one church was going to appear to be elevated over another. It was the National Council of Churches which agreed to take over the governing role, but the Catholic Church did not initially join this relationship – in fact until after 1965, there was little joint cooperation between the National Council of Churches and the Catholic Church on social, theological and immigration issues.

The reasons underpinning not joining the arrangement for Prison Chaplaincy were stated by Cardinal Tom Williams as being because of the differences in ecclesiology, theology and polity of the Catholic Church and the NCC Churches. Cardinal Williams argued that the Catholic chaplain like the parish priest was the vicar acting vicariously on behalf of the bishop. This impasse was eventually bridged, aided by the desire of the state services to include Catholics in the arrangement, with agreement that a Senior Catholic Chaplain, equivalent to the Senior Protestant Chaplain, be appointed by the Catholic Church. Although there was now an arrangement between the churches, it took long and patient intervention by a committed and sensitive public servant for the individual church members to learn to overcome their suspicion of each other and work together to provide an effective and Ecumenical Prison Chaplaincy service.

Throughout this time a suitable model for Prison Chaplaincy was being sought by the Department of Justice and the Prison Chaplaincy Service. The New Zealand justice system has been developed on systems in America, Britain and Europe. In 1973 a Senior Prison Chaplain, in his report on his sabbatical study of prisons in those countries, reported that he had found little that could be applied in New Zealand. This particularly related to the lack of acknowledgement that Māori have a culture and tradition which they are struggling to maintain – one which we as Pakeha could have embraced and preserved with them – and that culture is community based. This was acknowledging the lack of recognition of the needs of our indigenous people, a problem that exists still.

The Prison Chaplaincy Service continued to evolve over the next years facing a number of political, legislative and environmental challenges, being submitted to a number of reviews, the demise of the National Council of Churches, and the change of personnel within government departments. The chaplains were also unhappy that they were responsible to a government department, which had drawn responsibility away from the churches.

In 2000 the Prison Chaplaincy Trust Board was established to enter into a contractual relationship with the Department of Corrections. Membership of the trust board was made up of churches holding a Trinitarian confession, with the power to co-opt additional skills as required. This new relationship had many implications for prison chaplaincy, including the change in relationship and the lack of understanding by the department of what prison chaplaincy represented.

This structure continues to be the governance body for prison chaplaincy today. There have been various periods of growth and struggle, particularly with the requirements of the accountabilities and reporting that accompany a contractual relationship. Prison Chaplaincy has had to continually upgrade its systems and its professionalism and standards, at the same time retaining its identity as a competent provider of religious and spiritual services for all prisons in New Zealand.

New Zealand has the second-highest imprisonment rate in the Western World after the United States of America with 214/100,000 population, compared with Australia 172/100,000, England/Wales 139/100,000, and Ireland 81/100,000.

We have had a reducing crime rate over the past 20 years, while the prison population has trebled since 1987; and we have a 60 per cent reoffending rate within two years!

Maori make up 16 per cent of the general population but 51 per cent of the prison population.

Since 1979 various Governments have introduced increasingly harsh legislation intended as a deterrent to crime. This has only resulted in increased prison population, harsher penalties and increased difficulties getting parole. “Tough on Crime” has become a standard election slogan.

With the increased prison population comes overcrowding, with double bunking now being the norm. Difficulties in recruiting and retaining Corrections staff have resulted in increased and longer lockdowns reducing access to a range of services including chaplaincy.

Gang membership is increasing, compounded by the infiltration of some of the more notorious gangs from Australia and America. Access to illegal drugs such as methamphetamine is also contributing to this rise in gang numbers and to the prison population.

Australia has implemented a policy of deporting anybody who is not an Australian citizen who is found guilty of a designated offence which is punishable by at least two years’ imprisonment. This has resulted in more than 1600 people arriving in New Zealand with no local connections, having lived in Australia often since early childhood. Many are married and have children in Australia. Some 44 per cent of these deportees reoffend in New Zealand.

Another changing demographic is the increasing number of people who are dying in prison: some from natural causes; but there are now more old men who have been convicted of historical sexual abuse, some as old as 89 being imprisoned for the first time.

Currently there is a Royal Commission of Inquiry into all forms of abuse in state care and faith-based abuse. The Church is involved in this inquiry, and the inquiry is likely to uncover the link between abuse and imprisonment.

On site the chaplains work as a team of equal status. The Catholic chaplain is responsible for ministering with the Catholic inmates, assisting with their spiritual needs and providing for the Sacraments and occasionally the Sacraments of initiation. A diocesan bishop has baptised two people recently in each of the prisons in his diocese. The remainder of chaplains’ time is working with the other inmates including those of other faiths and of no faith.

In 2009, Caritas Social Justice Week was based on “A Justice that Reconciles.” This was the focus for parish gatherings and activities. One commitment from that week was the roll out of Seasons for Growth to be introduced into all prisons. The programme was developed by the Sisters of St Joseph in Sydney and is an educational and support programme based on the four seasons of autumn, winter, spring and summer. It deals with all forms of grief and loss and provides a forum for the participants to talk about long-standing hurts. Forgiveness is a significant aspect of the programme and assists the participants to let go of long held grievances. Although not in all prisons, it is now well established in seven prisons and it is proving to be very effective.

Another outcome of Social Justice Week was an “Adopt a Cell” project where prayer cards were distributed at all parish masses asking for people to pray for the occupant(s) of a specified cell. This project captured the imagination of many people and was updated in the Year of Mercy, when the cards were updated, and a prayer card was developed for every person in prison on the day of Jubilee.

Three months after the appointment of a new chaplain, he or she is commissioned at a Sunday Mass in their parish church. This is an attempt to raise the profile of prison ministry and to potentially attract further volunteers and involvement in the ministry.

A four-day National Catholic Prison Chaplains gathering has become an annual event with a purpose of formation and sharing of resources and stories. In 2018 this included an invitation to the Australian Catholic Chaplains which was a result of increased connections across the Tasman.

### **Areas for Attention and Development**

Prison ministry has a very low profile within the Church in New Zealand. A concerted campaign is needed to address this through parishes and agencies to place it in its rightful place of being a core corporal work of mercy. A short video was recently released on social media and a Question and Answer booklet is being developed to distribute through parish councils and other leadership groups.

A negative flow-on effect from the ministry being invisible in the wider church is the difficulty in recruiting chaplains to fill vacancies and attracting volunteers. Programmes for preparation for ministry are limited and those that are available do not cater for prison ministry. Suitable chaplains, as well as being theologically and pastorally prepared, must also be cognisant of the needs of Māori and be well able to minister to them.

There is a clear place for the voice of the churches in advocating for the needs and rights of prisoners. A united voice from the churches is held in high regards by Government bodies.

Under the terms of the contract with the Department of Corrections, chaplains and volunteers are not permitted to continue to minister to those released from prison. There is a significant gap in support available for those released, and an opportunity exists for churches to work together to develop some appropriate support services for these people. Similarly, our parishes are mostly not equipped to support those recently released.

### **In summary:**

- The prison chaplaincy service in New Zealand is a Government-funded ecumenical service with the Catholic Church having a sub-contract to provide Catholic chaplaincy. The Catholic Church is the only church to have such an arrangement.
- Successive governments have developed legislation to deter people from crime, but this has only resulted in longer, tougher sentences.
- Māori are grossly over-represented in the prison system with 51 per cent of the prison population and only 16 per cent in the general population.

### **References:**

Mansill Douglas B 2008      *A Civil Ecclesiastical Union? Development of Prison Chaplaincy in Aotearoa New Zealand.* Thesis Master of Philosophy. Auckland University of Technology