

STRANGERS CAN CARE SO MUCH

Alison Fernandes reports on what's been happening to support prisoners and their families

'The clink of gates and keys may not be for everyone, but I love to be back in prison,' reflects Jackie, as we share our highlights in our regular Prisons Community of Interest Zoom call. The last few months have seen a gradual lifting of Covid-19 restrictions, with opportunities for Mothers' Union to get back into prisons and involve themselves in

a whole host of different activities to support prisoners and their families.

Helping prisoners to keep in contact with their families is essential, not just for the mental health benefits experienced by all involved, but to aid the development of the more than 200,000 children who have a parent in prison. Family contact also supports resettlement at the end of a prison sentence and

plays a part in the reduction of reoffending.

Whatever your interest, there is likely to be something that you can get involved in as part of our work with prisoners and their families.

Meet MU members Jackie, Pauline and Olga who are using their God-given passion and skills to support prisoners and their families and to help keep them connected:

Jackie helps to facilitate

the 'Being Dad' course, where dads in prison have space to reflect on how they can be dad to their children. The first course since the Covid-19 lockdowns has recently finished and, over three mornings, five young dads explored topics such as children and their feelings, how they can listen and talk to children and children's rights and responsibilities. Creating space for these men to talk and listen to each other and therefore grow in confidence was valued. One dad reflected that he is now 'developing to become the father my kids deserve'.

Pauline volunteers in the Visitors' Centre of a prison – the first point of contact for families who are visiting. Visitors' Centres

provide an opportunity for volunteers to offer hospitality and welcome and to put people at ease in what can be a stressful environment. Over the pandemic, Visitors' Centres have had to operate slightly differently. The traditional welcome wasn't always possible, so Pauline was asked to run a support group on Zoom for families visiting for the first time, to help allay fears by learning what to expect and discussing how to communicate this with children. It has been so appreciated that Pauline plans to continue offering these groups on Zoom, even though opportunities for face-to-face welcome are now returning.

Olga's diocese used to supply lots of volunteers to their local prison Visitors'

Centre, but numbers dropped in the pandemic, so new opportunities to serve have been found. Mothers' Union, in partnership with a charity that supports ex-offenders, has started providing bags and essential items such as toiletries, underwear, phones and coffee vouchers for women on their release. Previously they were given a clear plastic bag stamped with the prison's name, so this is a wonderful alternative and helps them to feel valued and respected. The partner charity has been surprised by just how much Mothers' Union have provided, and the women receiving the bags have often been moved to tears to think that strangers could care so much.

PRISONS WEEK (9-15 OCTOBER 2022)

Mothers' Union is one of the sponsors of Prisons Week. This annual event has been running for over 40 years to raise awareness and generate prayer for all those affected by prisons – prisoners and their families, victims of crime and their communities, those working in the criminal justice system and the many people who are involved in caring for those affected by crime on the inside and outside of prisons.

We've talked to two of the key organisers of Prisons Week – Rev Canon Tim Bryan and Rachel Shackleton:

Why is Prisons Week important?

Tim: It reminds me of God's heart to bring healing, peace and freedom to those caught

up in the criminal justice system. Having worked as a police officer in the Met Police for 27 years, and then as a chaplain at Wandsworth Prison for 12 years, I have seen something of the worst and the best aspects of human behaviour. It was in prison that I witnessed the power of prayer, of fellowship in adversity and the new life that Jesus offers.

Rachel: It brings hope, courage and love to difficult times and places. We are always moved to hear of the effect, when people know we are praying for them and with them in Prisons Week. It is part of showing God's intention for them as people to be loved and not forgotten or ignored.

What is your hope for Prisons Week 2022?

Tim: That Christians would become aware of

the resources produced by Prisons Week, of the issues facing people, to pray and to be thankful for God's provision and sustaining power.

Rachel: That this prayer movement will grow, to affect and change lives in some way both for the pray-ers and the prayed with and for. (Thank you, MU, for making the prayer leaflet available!)

How can we use the Prisons Week prayer poster and guide (included with this issue of Connected)?

● **Individually** – stick the poster on your fridge door or window and commit to pray. Prayer underpins everything; we would love you to pray for all those involved and affected by prisons during Prisons Week.

● **With others** – organise a prayer meeting or discussion. The theme this year is thankfulness, drawing upon the story of the healing of the 10 lepers in Luke 17. We can think about what we are thankful for and how we understand Jesus saying, 'Rise and go; your faith has made you well'.

● **In church** – ask for prayers to be offered in your church on Prisons Sunday.

Order more prayer leaflets/posters for your church by emailing info@prisonsweek.org and visit www.prisonweek.org to watch the Prisons Week film and find out more.

We'd love to hear how your stories from Prisons Week 22 – email us at development@mothersunion.org