

Senior Prison Chaplain's Reflections: Deborah Kottek

17 April 2019

There were **8,158** prisoners in Victorian prisons on Friday, 5 April 2019, comprising 7,541 males and 617 females; 5,147 sentenced and 3,011 unsentenced prisoners. As at 5 April 2019, 36.9 per cent of the total prison population was on remand (3,011 prisoners).

Currently there are 16 prisons in Victoria, 13 public and 3 privately run. UCA has 12 chaplains funded to work between 1 hour and 16 hours per week in each prison.

The biggest change over the last 18 months has been the opening of Ravenhall Correctional Centre in November 2017. This is a state of the art prison with specialist focus areas: youth, aboriginal men, and has a 75 bed forensic mental health facility. Ravenhall is the largest prison in Victoria with a current capacity of 1,300 men but has been in negotiations to increase this to 1,600 men. Ravenhall is also large in terms of its physical footprint.

Prisons are one of a number of institutional areas where the UCA exercises the ministry of chaplaincy. Specifically in this area the UCA has contracts with The Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety for the 13 public prisons and with Geo Group Australia and G4S for the 3 private prisons in Victoria. We are paid only for the hours worked. Hours are reported and invoiced for, quarterly or monthly. Budget wise we support at least part of this ministry from the Synod's internal budget because staff leave is not reimbursed by the prisons.

I attend regular meetings with other faith organization Senior Chaplains and also with Corrections Victoria and the management teams of the 3 private prisons (Fulham, Port Phillip and Ravenhall).

Currently we have 2 vacant positions in prison chaplaincy, both in regional areas. One position (Ararat) is sitting within the placements process and the other (Murchison) is difficult to fill because it is only 3 hours per week. I have been covering the Ararat position in part.

A key part of the Senior Chaplain role is maintaining contact and providing support to UCA prison chaplains. I do this by email and phone contact and also by spending time with the chaplains in their ministry context. The ideal is to visit regionally based chaplains quarterly and metropolitan chaplains every 6 weeks. Where there has been a significant incident (riot, death of an inmate etc.), I ring to debrief and check on the chaplain's wellbeing.

Prison chaplains often work in isolation in an environment that is unpredictable and harsh. The issues that they encounter in their pastoral care of prisoners are often complex, intense and incredibly raw. In addition to this, we continually are faced with

situations that are desperate and unjust but we are powerless to respond in a tangible way so vicarious trauma is always a risk. Ministerial supervision is recommended but not provided. The reason that this occurs is because the UCA receives limited contract funding from the Government and has not put any additional resources into Prison Chaplaincy. In this situation, there is an ongoing risk for the church with regard to the 9 lay chaplains ministering in prisons. There are no allowances in their salary and conditions to cover supervision costs. In addition, the Church does not put any additional resources into funding prison chaplaincy so it remains an area of high needs and inadequate resources. Some chaplains work more hours than they are paid. Chaplains need access to training and professional development as well as retreats and peer networking. In order for resources to be developed and for chaplains to participate, we need to fund them the hours required to access and attend. This is not part of the salary and conditions of non-Ministerial chaplains.

I believe that the Church needs to ask itself what is its role in terms of people who are incarcerated. It costs \$130,000 per year per person in prison. Many people leave prison and return. There are no housing options, no social supports, insufficient and inaccessible drug rehabilitation beds and most people can't find employment. Many people in prison are young and come from the spectrum of multicultural backgrounds. Aboriginal people are highly represented. It has to be asked whether there is a broader role for the church in preventing people going into prison and supporting them to transition into community life. Currently the State Government has plans to build another prison at Lara. Is this where the community puts its resources into the future?

The UCA is contracted to provide pastoral care and worship in the prisons. This varies in each of the prisons.

Case Study - UCA Chaplain is onsite 2 days per week.

At one of the correctional centres we service, I, as the UCA Chaplain, provide fortnightly worship for Protection and Mainstream men (2 services). I alternate with the Anglican chaplain. Services are attended by 20-40 men but at Easter and Christmas, numbers are capped at 70-80 at each service (3-4 services to accommodate numbers). The men actively participate in services – scripture reading, prayers for their needs and for others, singing, playing instruments, assisting at Eucharist and helping to set up and pack up the chapel space. We share a cuppa and a biscuit afterwards. Bibles and small wooden cross necklaces are highly sought after and greatly appreciated.

Worship services are also run by me in a specialist mental health unit – currently 2 each week. Numbers that attend are small because many fluctuate in their state of wellness. Men in the different units cannot be brought together for services. Services are smaller and simpler because people often struggling with anxiety and/or voices and different senses of reality. The men in this area ask for their service – it means a lot to them so numbers attending don't matter. There is no music or hospitality due to the security

needs of these units although we are working to address this. Eucharist and prayer are very important to this cohort.

The pastoral care needs far exceed the time available. I minister to people of faith and no faith. Online referrals are followed up, men ask for visits after church services and men continually approach when you are walking around the yards. Often the prison officers will phone or approach you to request seeing someone who is distressed or in need of a listening ear. I am allocated 2 hours in the 41 bed Management unit each week where men held in 23 hour solitary lockdown can speak with the chaplain.

The types of issues raised in pastoral encounters are:

- Anxiety, fear, uncertainty – particularly for people on remand, people in prison for the first time, young people (18-24 years), and people who are approaching or have entered their parole period.
- Grief and loss – of a parent, sibling, friend, grandparent etc or loss of a relationship. The powerlessness and pain is unbearable in prison.
- Anger and frustration
- Managing addiction
- Adapting to the culture of prison and learning how to be 'safe'
- Despair – self-harming, depression, no meaning and no future
- Loneliness and isolation
- Shame and regret

Chaplains often connect with more vulnerable people in prison such as people who have an intellectual disability, acquired brain injury, autism, mental illness and chronic illness. Recently, I had a man attend church pushed in a wheelchair by a fellow inmate who told me that the young man couldn't speak. It turned out this person had Motor Neuron Disease and had been in the prison 2 weeks. Fortunately he was moved, hopefully to a more suitable place, the next day.

Pastoral care is provided in the specialist mental health unit after worship services. People who are quite unwell are locked in their rooms and allowed out for exercise on their own 1 hour per day. Many appreciate a visit where someone will listen to their story or experience. This can be an intense and exhausting experience for the chaplain.

Whenever an incident occurs in prisons, a code is called. When this occurs, all movement in the prison stops and men have to return to their units. Codes can be for medical alerts, for assaults or aggression toward an officer, aggression between men, fire etc. Last week I was leaving prison at 6.15pm when a code was called and I was requested to enter the nearest building for safety until the incident was sorted. This building happened to be the health unit. The incident was a riot in one of the units prior to evening lockdown. I watched officers donned in full riot gear running down the path and nurses identifying how many of their number were available to attend to the injured

as well as the number of beds available – no one was going home for a while. I spent my evening talking to several young men who came in for first aid and monitoring whilst they waited to be transported to hospital. I was so glad I was there to assist in this small way and felt a strange sadness when over 2 hours later as I was leaving, saw the ominous prison transport van heading out into the darkness – no doubt full of those other young men who were involved but not so badly injured. I wondered about their uncertain fate and how they were feeling now. I prayed for those others who had witnessed the evening, the violence and the panic, and were now locked in their cells, where they would remain for the next few days, while the incident was investigated, learnt from and recovery can begin. Just another day.