

Report to Synod 2022 from the Senior Prison Chaplain – Craig Madden

I officially took on the role of Senior Prison Chaplain in October 2020 In the midst of COVID 19 Pandemic and prisons lockdown. Since taking on the role, I have reduced my time directly in the prisons from five days per week to three. The other two days are now spent in administration. I had originally maintained a direct chaplaincy role at Loddon and Middleton prisons where I would travel to Bendigo to perform my role and at Metropolitan Remand Centre (MRC). Recently I have taken on the Chaplaincy role at the Melbourne Assessment Prison and continue at the MRC.

The work of Prison chaplaincy within the ministry of the Uniting Church in Australia is a challenging, vital and rewarding work, which is not always fully comprehended or understood due to the nature and confidentiality of our ministry.

At this time UCA Chaplaincy has seven Chaplains working throughout Victoria. During the last year, three Chaplains have concluded chaplaincy with us primarily due to the lack of our physical attendance in prisons and two due to retirement. Mr David Baxter retired in November after 13 years as Chaplain to the MAP. Rev. Barbara Strickland retires in the month of writing this report after several years as UCA Chaplain to Fullham prison situated in Gippsland. The situation of Chaplains leaving at this time has been our greatest difficulty, and we have been working extremely hard to replace them. We have gained two new chaplains who have entered into Loddon and Middleton, and one who will be shortly commencing at the Women's prisons of Dame Phyllis Frost Centre and Tarrengower prison. We hope to have one Chaplain covering the area of Port Phillip South which includes four prisons within that group; Ravenhall Correctional facility, Barwon Prison, Marngoneet and Kareenga prisons.

Prisons (as other institutions and organisations) have experienced severe staff shortages over the past two years, with one prison reporting up to 150 staff unable to work over a fortnight period as a direct result of the virus COVID 19. In this period our efforts to recruit, train and bring staff to a position of readiness to enter prisons has paid off. This is extremely fortunate when we take into consideration the National Police checks for our own organisation and Corrections Victoria, as well as a regime of Infection control training programs required for all Victorian Prisons prior to entering are considered. There are several other conditions required for new chaplains that form a part of the complex procedures, such as individual prison inductions and training onsite and via ZOOM.

As of February 2022 the prisoner resident numbers have been steadily returning to pre-COVID numbers. There are 2927 unsentenced prisoners throughout Victoria as part of a total prison population of 6300 male prisoners and 360 Female prisoners

Several units in all prisons remain re-purposed to house prisoners in screening and assessment (for Covid 19 Virus) before entering into mainstream prison populations, total areas are closed to visitation from professionals and residents are in lock down and isolated, should the virus be detected. This is unlikely to change for the rest of 2022.

For the last two years to late March, Chaplains have been meeting with prisoners over Zoom,

and via telephone. This has been difficult for the most part, but on a positive note, it has afforded in most cases an uninterrupted and confidential conversation that in ways has allowed conversations to run deeper. But they are limited by time, and there is no substitute for our physical presence, even though we are extremely grateful for the opportunity to minister in any way we can.

As of two months ago, Prison Chaplains were permitted access to Victorian prisons as a general ruling from Corrections Victoria. Unfortunately, there remain several sites where Chaplains have still not gained access, or have very limited access. For those Chaplains onsite, as with representatives of many other organisations, there are requirements for physical distancing and room numbers regulations. We must utilise the physical infection protection items provided in prison and use them to differing extents depending on the Units within prisons we are visiting. Services providing communion have strict regulations including no contact with bread or wine, and gloves in any distribution of the elements.

Chaplains were the last of the professional workers in prisons to leave; unfortunately, we were also the last of the professionals to be invited back, by several months.

My role in prisons remains along the lines of two streams, that being my own Chaplaincy work, and work within administration and operational management. The past several months has been both rewarding and difficult, as Corrections Victoria have sought to have all Chaplaincy roles filled within all prisons. This has meant that a great deal of my work has been taken up with recruiting, training and Inductions. The task of bringing newly appointed chaplains to a place of readiness to minister within prisons is extensive and prolonged, beginning with national Police Checks There are Inductions at each separate site, there are local inductions with RLC's (Regional Liaison Chaplains), and there is onsite training and induction required from the Senior Chaplain. These tasks can take more than three months to complete. Considering our task of providing new Chaplains to eight sites this last year and beyond the date of this report, it is an enormous task.

As a point of some encouragement, we have been able to recruit to four prisons during the Lockdown period, and we are almost at the stage of independent prison entry for the first of these recruits. We are close to gaining access to two other prisons with the second of these recruits. We continue to be challenged in providing Chaplain(s) to the area of Port Phillip South group of prisons, despite rolling advertisements and seeking candidates for Placement for over seven months.

I have stated on several occasions that Prison Chaplaincy is quite a complex and nuanced role, and we do not quite know how a Chaplain will "go" until they are actually doing the role. Unfortunately, prisons being what they are, we cannot replicate the real chaplaincy experience prior to entry to prison so there is much to discuss and discern prior to performing the role on site.

Whilst a specific UCA prison chaplaincy role is isolated somewhat from the team of other UCA prison chaplains, there are often strong teams built within the prisons amongst chaplains of all faiths.

As for my own journey and provision of ministry to prisons, I remain extremely positive, and in some ways extremely fortunate to serve in this way. Being a Uniting Church Chaplain is particularly satisfying as there is a recognition that we are present for more than residents with a background in the Uniting, Presbyterian, Congregational or Methodist churches. Whilst it is our role to seek out residents who are listed with those denominational affiliations it is recognised that we assist in providing pastoral care and friendship to people of faith, and people who do not claim any faith whatsoever. On the daily lists and referrals to the chaplaincy office in our prisons, it is expected that the Uniting Church chaplain will specifically make themselves known to that group listed as "Christian other". Whilst this is a rather peculiar way of describing the faith of a person, it is an invitation for Uniting Church Chaplains to truly minister and come alongside people who share in the journey of uniting that is central to our place as Uniting Church ministry agents. Whilst this aligns with our own convictions as representatives of the Uniting Church, it provides significant impetus for me and my own faith journey.

The opportunity to walk alongside prisoners, without the obstacles and the difficulties associated with judgement of guilt or innocence, to be a presence and an advocate for hope, right there, right then is significant for us. To be aware that our work is just a part of a whole range of things that are happening for a person, and to consider that our role might even be just a beginning to restoration, and reconciliation. A work that begins right there, not after incarceration, but right at that time within the prison, to be an encouragement for a person. The responsibility of this as it is understood and played out daily in my role enables me to work within the multiple complexities of residents lives.

This message of hope should and does permeate all that I say, in the services I conduct in prisons, in my conversations in the yards, and to prison management and staff, and all that I do as I enter the prisons walking through all the concrete and all the barbed wire, and several gates to begin my role each morning, and throughout the day.

Thank you for your support and prayers.