

## Meet The Members: August 2024

### Sister Maureen Murphy



I was born and grew up on the Isle of Wight at a time when my home town of Ryde was a popular holiday destination for those wishing to holiday in England, rather than overseas. As children, my two brothers and I spent most of our out-of-school hours on the beach or at the far end of the pier which was a mile long. Health and Safety had not been invented so we were unimpeded by fences, safety railings and the need for constant adult supervision. Our weekly treat was either half-an-hour on the local boating lake in canoes or a rowing

boat or Saturday morning pictures with a serial detective story which always ended on a cliffhanger.

Four children from my class at primary passed the eleven-plus exam and my friend Sandra and I opted to attend Sandown Grammar School which entailed a daily, twenty-minute journey on a steam locomotive. After the 1963 Beeching report, the steam trains were replaced by old underground carriages and an electrified line which is still in use today.

We thought we were far enough away from school to break the rules about wearing full uniform all the way home until the two of us found ourselves in detention for being seen by a teacher not wearing our much-hated straw boaters.

As an active parishioner in my local Roman Catholic church, I was invited by one of the Presentation Sisters to accompany her on a visit to one of the three prisons we had on the Island at that time. Today there is one prison on two adjoining sites but back then we visited Parkhurst High Security Prison. I was given a badge and was described as “RC Chaplain and Company” when we came to every gate needing to be unlocked. It was only after my first visit that I came to know the names of some of the men we engaged with in discussion groups in the chapel and learned they were high profile figures in the IRA, imprisoned for terrorist offences. We were asked not to discuss names with family or friends. Later we were stopped from going because of hunger strikes and the danger that we might be held to ransom, although I do not remember ever feeling in any danger.

When I left school I worked for a short time as an administrator in an insurance company before moving to NHS administration. I lived with my elderly grandmother who was housebound but my first real contact with older people was when I was appointed administrator of the new geriatric day hospital, a fairly new concept in the NHS. Later I

joined the planning team for the new low-energy hospital which was to be built as a prototype in the early days of people becoming aware of the need to care for our environment. It was during this time that I became aware of God calling me to become a missionary and my initial reaction was reminiscent of tennis player John McEnroe's famous phrase "You cannot be serious."

When I asked my manager for a reference he really thought I was playing a practical joke until an official letter arrived on his desk. I was a career woman enjoying life and surely a call to be a missionary was just an over-active imagination fuelled by things I had read in church magazines about missionaries in Africa! The call persisted and eventually I talked to a visiting priest who was a Mill Hill Missionary who put me in touch with the Franciscan Missionaries of St Joseph. The rest as they say is history because it is now over forty years ago since I made my first profession of vows.

After my initial training as a Sister I attended the Missionary Institute in London for a course in missiology and then in 1986 I was appointed to our mission in El Guasmo, Guayaquil, Ecuador. El Guasmo was a place where life had little value, where buses were held up and passengers robbed, where murder was commonplace, but at the same time it was a place where children knew how to share anything we gave them and where the truly poor people had a sense of community when it came to helping one another through the joys and sorrows and ups and downs of life.

My main task was to set up Base Ecclesial Communities and some of these still exist today. These groups met in the house of a local person and about twenty people would come together once a week to pray.

We used the Bible as a means of reflecting on daily life, and shared what was happening in the local area and further afield, asking how Jesus would have reacted in various situations and finding the courage to speak up when we needed to on behalf of the poor. After a year I moved to another mission, this time in a rural area reached by crossing a river in a canoe in which one had to stand alongside a dozen or so other people plus gas tanks, pigs, chickens and whatever else needed to cross. Here I worked in catechetics preparing children and teenagers for the Sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist and Confirmation and, in the frequent absence of the priest, burying the dead. I visited a lot of elderly people, most of whom lived with family, with several generations living under one roof. I would have liked to have visited the prison but there was no possibility at that time. Today the prisons in Ecuador are hot beds of drug-dealing and frequent murders of both staff and fellow inmates. In 1992 my life took an unexpected turn as for the first time in my life I became seriously ill. A bout of dengue fever left me completely washed out and was followed by hepatitis which led to

various tests and a diagnosis of a hydatid cyst in my liver. My dream of staying in Ecuador for life was over and I was sent home to be treated in hospital here.

After a long period in hospital and eventual surgery to remove my gall bladder, I was asked to remain in England and to work in the finance office of the Congregation. A year later I was appointed head of finance for the Congregation and remained in post for the next eighteen years. To keep myself sane during this time I studied theology, first of all gaining a Bachelor of Theology degree from Oxford and then a Masters in Theology from University of Wales, Lampeter. For my MA thesis I decided to write on Spirituality and Ageing. There was very little literature around and it was at this time that I first contacted Christians on Ageing to ask if they could help me. I became a member in 2006 and about a year later, when reading PLUS, I noticed an appeal for someone to become their treasurer. I have been doing the job ever since.

Part of my responsibilities as Bursar in my Congregation was care of the elderly Sisters and we had two care homes one of which also took older ladies from the local area. There was a minefield of legislation to negotiate and I became something of an expert in health and safety and infection control. Sisters never really “retire”. Yes, we may finish our active ministry as chaplains or nurses, administrators or social workers but the task of spreading the Good News of the Kingdom is life-long and we continue the task in quieter ways. Some maintain an interest in justice and peace issues, often writing to Members of Parliament and Government departments on behalf of the marginalised.

One Sister, who worked in the United States continued to correspond with a prisoner she met on Death Row for over thirty years after she came home. She is now ninety-five but Rick, the prisoner she wrote to, died a couple of years ago. Our older Sisters also join the rest of us both here and overseas in supportive prayer initiatives during the Season of Creation each year.

Those in our care homes minister to one another, visiting the sick and providing a listening-ear to our staff or visitors who need to talk about problems. In our later years, the Sisters also enjoy having more time for prayer and quiet reflection. Many still use the internet and email, often taking great interest in the ministries of our younger Sisters in Kenya and Uganda.

I do not have a lot of leisure time but, when I have chance to relax, I am an avid reader and enjoy jigsaws and the challenge of difficult Sudoku grids. I am not very gifted creatively but do enjoy knitting complex patterns for my two young great-nephews.

Christians on Ageing developed an interest in older prisoners because one of the Trustees was a prison chaplain at Norwich. We became interested in how older prisoners were

cared for and I visited HMP Wymott where a pioneering CAMEO centre was being run by husband-and-wife Salvation Army officers. Here, older prisoners came together several mornings a week and learned new skills like basic cookery and computing. Those due for release were introduced into the use of debit cards, booking appointments online and seeking employment and they looked forward to having a focus of somewhere to go and something to do outside of their tiny cells. I understand a further two of these centres have now opened in other prisons, which is certainly good news.

In 2011 I was elected leader of my Congregation and was privileged to visit our Sisters working in Kenya and Uganda and to return to Ecuador. On one visit in Kenya, I accompanied a Sister to a women's prison and on another I visited a detention centre for youngsters aged eleven to fifteen. I had nightmares afterwards remembering how their accommodation seemed to be shipping containers full of bunk beds, with their only stimulation seeming to be a football the Sister took with her twice a week when she visited. Conditions in UK prisons are complained about but clearly they are much worse in some other parts of the world.

In 2016 I became an Official Prison Visitor in order to visit prisoners who had no family or friends to visit them. It was a long, complex and tedious process to get accepted but then I was able to visit at HMP Manchester for several years until COVID put a stop to visits. Hearing firsthand from a prisoner about life inside opened my eyes and made me more aware of the needs of older prisoners.

At times I was angry at the apparent lack of provision for frail prisoners who had to rely on the kindness of fellow inmates to help them even move around. I read reports of overcrowding and lack of medical facilities in older buildings which cannot be adapted to provide better surrounding for those lacking mobility. With my fellow Trustee, Gerry Burke, we produced a booklet of prayers and reflections for prisoners, entitled "Seeking a Peaceful Heart" and hopefully these have helped a few people on a bad day. Copies are available free from our Secretary.

I continue to be part of the Christians on Ageing prisons subgroup. We are just a small organisation who would like to work with others to improve conditions for older prisoners in any way we can, but it is very hard to penetrate such a closed system even to establish what the real needs are, let alone achieve anything. If you have persevered in reading this article and know of any way we can help prisoners please do write and let us know at: [secretary@christiansonageing.org.uk](mailto:secretary@christiansonageing.org.uk)

## The Rev. Dr. Joseph D Cortis



I was born in 1956 in the Mediterranean island of Malta, the middle child with two sisters with very little in way of age difference between us. My family background was very working class, with a father who was illiterate and a mum who received basic primary education but who always saw education as the ticket for bettering one's life chances.

Malta is proud of a very long history, with its distinct language, culture and traditions linked with both Europe and North Africa. Links to Christianity go back to the year 60 A.D. when St. Paul was

shipwrecked there and stayed for three months (ref. Acts of the Apostles).

Having attended a faith based secondary school, I felt that I had a calling for the priesthood in the order of 'Salesians of Don Bosco' (SDB), a world-wide renowned religious order focusing on Christian education of young people; but this was not to be although the spark for some sort of ordained ministry did raise its head again much later on in my journey. In my early teens I used to take part in a children's programme on the national radio station and offer an occasional spiritual reflection to a 'Woman's Hour' on the local radio and submitting an occasional 'letter to the Editor' of a local paper.

At the age of 18, I came to Yorkshire (Huddersfield), my first time abroad, to undertake nurse training which at the time was very much based on an apprenticeship system and learning '*at the side of Nellie*' which very much depended on how learned '*Nellie*' was. My arrival in the UK nearly 50 years ago started a period of seeing things previously only seen on TV or the cinema such as vast green spaces, rivers, mountains, automatic doors, escalators etc.

So for the first three years, I trained in general nursing but soon followed further training in mental health nursing because in caring for patients I soon realised that to provide holistic care one needed to consider all the needs of the individual. Nursing seems to run 'in the blood' in my family, mainly that my maternal grandfather was a nurse and although I never met him, the stories I heard about him in my youth did impress me eg through the neighbours calling to seek his advice on medical ailments (now done through Advanced Nurse Practitioners) and also him being one of the founding members of the trade-union for nurses in Malta. Although I stayed in practice for just over 9 years (7years as a charge nurse) I experienced a number of clinical settings such as urology, general surgery,

respiratory medicine, cardiology, cardio-thoracic surgery, paediatric cardiology and intensive care. During this period, I developed a keen interest in teaching.

By the mid-1980s nurse education was experiencing a major reform in terms that '*nurses needed to be knowledgeable doers*'. This of course meant that the teaching staff also needed to be prepared for this challenge. Hence, I embarked on an academic journey of over 25 years. Between 1989 -2000 I got a first degree in nursing with education, an M.Sc. in 'Race Relations and Community Studies' and a PhD in Sociology and Social Policy.

Over my academic career, I fulfilled a number of roles such as lecturer, education manager, researcher and various external roles with a large number of universities in the UK and abroad as external examiner, consultant, academic reviewer and carrying out a number of quality assurance roles for the Nursing and Midwifery Council (the professional and regulatory body of nursing and midwifery). My academic experience was based in one of the Russell Group Universities which offered me the opportunity of engaging with students and academics from 8 different health and social care professions within the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry, Psychology and Health. This period resulted in a respectable record of published academic papers, conference presentations and towards the latter end of my career the honour of being an Associate Professor of Nursing.

Over time I developed a strong desire for community engagement which was mainly fulfilled through a 6-year period as Chair of the Dewsbury and District Community Health Council, a body set up in the late 1970s to hear the voice of the community about the services provided by the health service and to support patients in information giving and support during the complaints processes. This was also the era of the introduction of general management ethos in the NHS and the first attempts at creating NHS trusts.

Another voluntary role which I enjoyed is being a school governor. This covered short periods being a governor at a primary and a middle school but a much longer 18-year period of Chairing the Governing Body of a large Catholic Secondary School which included a small sixth form, and concurrently also a period of 4-years as Chair of a Diocesan Educational Academy Trust. The role of Chair of Governors and an academy trust is very demanding and complex, dealing with academic, structural, human resources, contracts, finance issues etc. and of course 'OFSTED'.

In 2010 I was ordained as a permanent deacon for the Catholic Diocese of Leeds following on from a 4-year part-time training and period of discernment. Although I do not live in the Leeds Cathedral parish boundary, I was placed there for my ministry which has been a joy engaging with a very diverse parish, liturgically demanding roles, preaching, administering some sacraments and running courses for adults who wish to become Catholic. This

position involves me engaging with civic fora across the City and beyond. For a while I was on the leadership group of Leeds Citizens, which is a chapter of Citizens UK. I am also a trustee of Catholic Care, our diocesan charity, a smaller charity focusing on the spiritual needs of older people called 'Growing Old Gracefully' and Leeds Church Institute.

In 2016 my Bishop asked me to set up our Diocesan Caritas as a non-service provider agency to support already existing social action but also to spark off other interests. The latter involved focusing on issues relating to people living with disabilities, dementia, youth leadership, refugees and asylum seekers and issues concerning the criminal justice system. There are numerous resources developed to support engagement with these groups through this website: [www.dioceseofleeds.org.uk/caritas](http://www.dioceseofleeds.org.uk/caritas) One of the major outputs was the report from the Caritas Leeds Criminal Justice Inquiry under the title of 'Justice and Mercy' which includes a set of challenging recommendations for action. The following is the link for this report: [www.dioceseofleeds.org.uk/caritas/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Justice-Mercy-19102020-for-web.pdf](http://www.dioceseofleeds.org.uk/caritas/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Justice-Mercy-19102020-for-web.pdf)

Together with a colleague from St Mary University in Twickenham, we produced a book through Redemptorists Publications under the title of 'Journeying Together: living with dementia'.

My current role within the diocese is that of the Diocesan Assistant Director for the Permanent Diaconate focusing specially on formation of students in training and also on-going formation of our diocesan deacons. It is very gratifying that this role offers me an opportunity to engage with others across the other five northern Catholic Dioceses.

Linking with 'Christians on Ageing' happened by accident in that I attended the Annual Conference in Sheffield in 2019 and soon after I was invited to join its executive team. My experience with older people is very much linked to my professional life and my ministry as a deacon and ministry as a volunteer hospital chaplain.

Growing up I never had the privilege of having the experience of older family members, for example, I never knew any of my 4 grandparents. Over time I have certainly seen a deterioration in society's view of older people not appreciating that they have a lot to contribute to the society at large and am simply influenced by Pope Francis' emphasis on the role of older people to every society. The work that I led on in regard to the criminal justice system through Caritas Leeds has sparked off an interest in the challenges experienced by older people within the criminal justice system and who form a substantial percentage of the prison population. Hence, I became the Chair of the CoA's 'Older Prisoners Group'.

For many years Christians on Ageing have had a particular interest in older prisoners. The late Michael Butler, who was a trustee undertook sterling work among older prisoners at HMP Norwich. Research has shown that the proportion of older prisoners is increasing all the time. In society as a whole the incidence of dementia continues to grow and this is bound to be the case also in prisons. The Government defines an older prisoner as someone over the age of fifty and this means the number of older prisoners is even higher. At the same time the age of prison buildings means that the conditions in which prisoners are housed are constantly deteriorating and many are now unfit for purpose. Our concern is to know what is being done particularly in older prison buildings to provide accommodation suitable for the needs of those who are sick or have limited mobility. Few prisons appear to have special medical facilities for the physically frail and still fewer employ nurses to care for those who can no longer care for themselves. With increasing numbers of frail elderly, should their care continue to be reliant upon the kindness of fellow prisoners?

Many older prisoners have served long sentences and the society into which they are released is a very different one to what they knew when they were first imprisoned. Many no longer have family members to support them and they end up on the streets, homeless. They also commit a further crime just to get back to having a roof over their heads in prison. This is likely to be an increasing problem but what is being done to plan for the future?

Christians on Ageing is also concerned for the spiritual well-being of prisoners and with this in mind we recently produced a book of prayers and reflections for prisoners. Copies were sent to every prison in England and Wales. It is called *'Seeking a Peaceful Heart'*.

As an organisation, we would like to be more pro-active in our support of older prisoners but we are finding that discovering what the needs are is fraught with difficulty because access to the people concerned is understandably restricted. We would be interested in working with similar organisations but establishing links has not been easy.

Through our link with the St. Vincent de Paul (SVP) prisons group we have had some success and are hoping to increase our contact with prison chaplains as a means of increasing our knowledge base and being in a better position to respond to individual needs.

Over the next few months we are hoping to develop ideas on how we can encourage Christian congregations with prison establishments nearby to identify ways of working with those locked up long term and possibly having no one to be with. We are fortunate in having had really useful discussions with professionals involved in prisoner support, including the work of probation and Christian-based projects in some prisons. If we can



establish links with prison chaplains where there is specific provision for older prisoners we can disseminate this information in local areas and encourage the involvement of parishioners from the main Christian denominations.

Well, it is not all work and no play. Walking is my favourite relaxation time whilst listening to 'Classic FM' station, hinting that I love classical music. Travelling is also a passion of mine, having visited most of the European countries, some of which on more than one occasion; seeking to explore their historical sites, museums, taste their cuisine etc. Family life is also very important to me, not a grandparent yet. Reading is another interest of mine especially biographies ....whom you ask? Well, that is for me to know.