

Conference Call – October 2025:

Speaker – Josefiina Kalliokoski (Prisons Ministry Manager – Salvation Army).

Josefiina's background is that she is Finnish, studied for a degree in criminology at Nottingham University and served as a prison officer here in the UK before finding herself in her current role with the Salvation Army. As well as speaking specifically about the Salvation Army's work in prisons, she led us in a wide-ranging discussion which was both helpful and illuminating.

Prison Ministry has been a core part of the Army's mission for a very long time. For example, Salvation Army officers used to meet people at the prison gate when they were leaving prison and take them to hostels, almost like a "probation" type of service. And even though it's not talked about as much as some other areas of the Army's work, like homelessness or anti-human trafficking, it is an essential part of the Salvation Army's Christian mission in response to the call of Jesus and the example of their founder, William Booth. He made a very powerful speech where he said that as long as men go in and out of prison, he'll fight, and that commitment continues. There are currently about 15 Salvation Army prison chaplains across England and Wales, some of whom cover more than one prison. Some other Salvation Army departments run workshops and do work in prison – for example, the Employability Service does courses in a few different prisons and there is the beginning of a work offering debt advice in prisons.

Prison Chaplains are an integral part of everyday life in prison and Salvation Army chaplains are able to sprinkle in some special Salvation Army elements into their work – for example offering the Family Tracing Service, which helps prisoners to contact lost family members, at no cost to prisoners. They also offer Christian distance learning courses at no cost, which is quite a moving ministry because there is such a wide range of different courses that people can do. And they get a personal tutor that grades and comments on their work, which can be a really empowering thing for someone.

The Army has, in recent years, established CAMEO Centres (Come and Meet Each Other) which are aimed primarily at older prisoners and are currently in four different prisons - HMP Wymott near Preston, HMP Usk and HMP Prescoed in South Wales, and the most recent one in HMP North Sea Camp, near Boston, Lincolnshire. Wymott and Usk are closed prisons and Prescoed and North Sea Camp are open prisons. Cameo started over a decade ago in HMP Wymott. There were two Salvation Army officers, who were serving as chaplains, and they noticed that there were a lot of older guys who didn't have anything to do, didn't have anywhere to go, were stuck in their cells and just living very lonely, isolated lives. Prisons are not designed for older people (you might say that they're not really designed for anyone to feel well!) But if you've lived a whole life on the outside before you come to prison, you'll be offered basic English or basic maths class or barbering or something that doesn't speak to the life that you've lived and the person that you are. And on the other hand, if you've been in prison for a long time, there's not anywhere to go and there's nothing that is specifically offered for you.

Older prisoners (i.e., those aged over 50) are the fastest growing demographic and there's a few different reasons for that.

- repeat offenders, often serving short sentences for something that is not necessarily super serious, but people just keep on offending.
- people serving shorter sentences later in life.
- in the UK, people are just given much longer sentences than they used to. So, there are just more people growing old in prison.
- people coming to prison for the first time later in life for historical offences – this has caused a massive spike in the number of older prisoners.

Cameo is a good example of the Salvation Army's approach, as a church and as a charity, that when they see a need, they figure something out. Those two chaplains saw that there were these chaps that had nothing to do, thought, what can we do for them? And now there's a whole programme based on that. Just these two people feeling called towards supporting and caring for almost a forgotten group. The official tagline for Cameo is that "we support older prisoners through meaningful activities and positive relationships in order to improve well-being, reduce social isolation and offer opportunities for rehabilitative interventions."

What that looks like in practice is that activity hubs are open, usually Monday to Thursday morning and afternoon, according to the prison regime, when people can come in, have a cup of tea, and a slice of toast. Lots of different activities are offered but, even more importantly, folk can just come in for a chat or come in and do your own thing, not even really talk to anyone.

Clearly prisons want to tick certain boxes and look good in inspections, so one of the things that they love about Cameo is that it offers prisoners time out of their cell and an opportunity to engage in meaningful activities. These include different art projects, crafts, therapy pets visiting and some outside speakers visiting. What the Cameo participants say they appreciate most is the consistency of being able to come to a calm, relaxed environment where there is a sense of community. You are being seen, you are cared for, people are interested in how you're doing.

Cameo also plays a big role in helping people navigate the prison system, especially if they come to prison for the first time at an older age. It is a massive shock to the system and it's very, very difficult to understand what is going on most of the time, how to advocate for yourself, how to get the support and the help that you need.

As mentioned before, two Cameo centres are in open prisons where people are preparing for release. Prison is such a bizarre experience, no matter what age you are, that the thought of getting out can be quite terrifying for a lot of people. For a lot of the men in cameo, what they often say is that they didn't really do a lot of household tasks when they were on the outside, and many don't know how to cook meals. So, there's some cooking classes – learning to make simple, cheap meals.

Cameo is not chaplaincy but is an obvious kind of Christian mission. Cameo, from the prison's point of view, is not a religious service, but it is Christian inspired. Testimony from participants includes the following observations:

- Coming to Cameo is a relief.
- No one is shot to the side or excluded.
- There's nothing for us to do without cameo. You would be sat in your cell in isolation. You wouldn't walk, talk, or do anything without cameo.
- Cameo gives me the chance to take part in activities, to distract myself from all the things that go through my head.
- Without cameo, I would be stuck in my cell with negative thoughts. And cameo gives me the chance to mix with people my own age and to enjoy social interaction.
- And as a bit of a reflection, if you were to visit one of our cameo centres at any given day, there would be some guys playing dominoes, someone doing a jigsaw, someone drawing or painting, some people just chattering, some maybe reading a book or kind by themselves, people maybe watching a film. So, I think the big reflection there is that it's not.

Cameo shows the power of a loving, caring presence, and community. The cameo managers are fantastic people. A new Cameo began in the summer and in a probation review with the new manager, she said, "I feel like I'm getting paid to be nice to people! We are offering people a community that they also have a sense of ownership of and a place to feel welcome and part of something when in prison is easy to feel very, very alone."

Josefiina opened the call to conversation and discussion which was wide-ranging. It ended with consideration of the question as to why, as Christians on Ageing we should continue to promulgate the work among older prisoners to our members and beyond. Josefiina's response was this. "I'm probably biased because of course I am just very very passionate about this kind of work. But I think as Christians, we don't get to pick and choose who we love who we care for. And I almost feel like prison ministry is such a beautiful spiritual challenge because it forces you to really face some of your own prejudice and it completely transforms your capacity for compassion. And you might think of yourself as an all-loving all welcome, empathetic Christian, but what about when it is someone who's offended against children, and maybe doesn't show remorse for example, which is a massive reality. How do you show Christian care and Christian love for people that in a lot of other people's opinion don't deserve it and are not worthy? And I often think that there's no way that Jesus wouldn't have been doing prison ministry! That's the way I look at it and I just feel that as a church we're just called to it and it is like I said a big challenge but also it just edifies you so much and you get to do something so meaningful and I feel like we're called to be where there's a need and there is an endless need in the prison service."