

September 2018

# Beyond the Bars

*Carrying the AA message of recovery in British prisons*



Welcome to the autumn edition of *Beyond the Bars*, a quarterly newsletter aimed at Regional PLOs and anyone interested in this vital aspect of service. Here you'll find articles, news and stories from AA members that reflect over 60-years of hands-on experience.

## Let the Light Out

As words go, 'paradox' is one I was not too familiar with, but I guess until you understand it through your own personal experience its truth remains hidden. Us alcoholics living by this new design can be forgiven for assuming that we carry light into dark places. However, it is now my belief that we only help create the corresponding conditions to let light out.

Peppered throughout the many reports I have written as Prison Liaison Officer and now a regional Prison Liaison Officer, there have always been real nuggets of hope. Like many of the personal spiritual experiences we have as alcoholics, maybe they do lose some of their potency in the sharing. It might be that the real reward of the experience can only be felt by those present, but by keeping an open mind and recognising that I am powerless over your appreciation of what follows, I can only leave it in the hands of a higher power.

The value of the AA group to the inmates in prison is conveyed quite masterly in the following paragraph from a report to conference 1976: "It is necessary to explain to members of prison groups that though they may not have access to alcohol, they can benefit from the programme of AA while they are in prison.

The time spent in confinement can be used in developing the mind and spirit so that they look outward instead of inward, that they should try to live with society as it is and not as they would want it to be, and to this end it is desirable to discuss the whole of the AA programme of recovery. While this may present difficulties because of the time factor, we feel that sponsors should refer at every opportunity to parts of the programme, e.g. one of the steps or traditions, or a part of the Big Book.

In this way we feel that it is possible to make the inmate member aware that he or she can live the AA way of life prior to discharge. This will assist in practising tolerance towards others, which in turn should help the member to live a more serene life in prison despite all the pressures."

These words are powerful and promise much; only those attending prison groups as sponsors or sharers can truly testify to their success. For myself, I must in the interest of balance, say yes. Many meetings I have attended in service over the years have had to deal with the mechanics of maintaining prison groups, often in adversity with prison regimes and even Governments occasionally changing the goalposts. But I feel duty-bound to report a personal awareness amongst my fellow sponsors of a very strong feeling of gratitude, an echoing appreciation of personal reward and above all a determination to give of self in the pursuit of "our primary purpose" that leaves me full of admiration.

I must leave the last word to my friend Jim, serving life in prison ... "One day, while walking around the hall, I heard an officer asking for men interested in attending an AA meeting and I thought I would check it out. At the meeting I met three of the nicest people on this earth, who I call 'The Faces of Hope.' "

*Marc*

*Prisons Liaison Officer*

*Scotia Region*

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## **Prisons and Service**

For me prisons and service will always be linked, as an alcoholic who attended his first AA meeting in prison, liked what I heard and embraced the 12 Step program, I have a deep sense of gratitude for those who “Carried the Message” to me. On being released from prison I asked my Sponsor when would I be able to return to as a prison sponsor? His response was “your time will come, but not just yet”.

Many years later, after years of service at group level, I was given the opportunity to become a Prison Liaison Officer, and be responsible for organising AA meetings in 2 prisons in my area. I was then informed by the prisons concerned that there was no way either Director of these prisons would allow me to attend meetings. In my time as a prisoner I had upset, aggravated and disrespected them, this they had taken personally, they obviously thought that I was still the same man they knew originally.

I was deeply disappointed at this setback, but after a period of reflection and a conversation with my sponsor, I realised that although I had been excluded from these 2 prisons AA had not been excluded, and therefore I still had work to do regarding prisons. I then set about attracting people to prison service and to have them "Carry the Message" to the inmates. We had 2 teams of sponsors taking meetings on a weekly basis, and 10 years later some of these people are still active in prison sponsorship.

My Higher Power continually surprises me, and as 2 doors closed another opened for me, I was approached by a Prison Liaison Officer, who aware of my situation said that there would be no such problems if I was willing to become a prison sponsor at Polmont Young Offenders Institute, I agreed immediately. This was the start of a 10 year relationship with HMYOI Polmont, broken only when I was employed on a professional basis within the prison as a Life Coach.

Working with this age group of 16-21 year old men and women can be challenging as they deny that they have an issue with alcohol, where have I heard that before. Therefore our role as prison sponsors is to raise awareness and to plant seeds in the minds of these young people. On most occasions this seed apparently falls on stony ground, there are the times when it falls into fertile soil, it has been my privilege to have taken

3 such young men through the 12 Steps of AA, and I am currently working with a 4<sup>th</sup>. I am not alone in this work, at Polmont we have 4 young people currently going through the program.

This work is being replicated in prisons throughout Scotland, many of our current sponsors are ex prisoners who gained and kept their sobriety whilst in prison. It has been recognised by the authorities that sober ex prisoners the ideal role models in “Carrying the Message” in prisons, often in the face of distrust and disbelief by some prison staff. The manner in which these people responded was key, they did not react with anger, they smiled and just carried on, this was the 12<sup>th</sup> Step in action. Through our actions and attitude we were able to dispel the distrust and disbelief amongst the staff and were able to gain their respect in doing so.

*Bruce B*

*Prison Subcommittee*

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## **News Roundup**

### **AA Literature for Prisons**

The Guidelines suggest that each intergroup and region should be responsible for the cost of supplying literature to those prisons within their remit. A request can be made by the PLO, or Prison Sponsor, and providing there are sufficient funds available, the literature can be ordered from GSO.

While each intergroup/region keeps a prudent reserve to cover running costs, AA funds are there for primary purpose activities, of which prison service is one. Prison inmates often lack information about AA and are always extremely grateful for any material they receive.

### **New combined front for Probation and Prisons**

Since Jeff B. has stood down as Probation Trustee for personal reasons, the Board are trying an experiment that will unite Probation and Prisons in a combined front. Board member for Prisons, Pat Mc,

has been appointed as Trustee for both disciplines, with a new Trustee to shadow him for a year, when appointed.

Closer cooperation between prison and probation officers will mean greater continuity with AA and the Ministry of Justice. AA will be able to offer help to those on probation, and to inmates in prison, carrying the message when they are released.

### **New DVDs available**

The new DVDs passed at Conference will be on the AA website with their own link to each discipline.

### **AA Presentation for Polmont YOI**

*'Unlocking potential, transforming lives'*

HMYOI Polmont is the only Young Offenders prison in Scotland, capable of housing up to 800 inmates. AA holds an induction meeting bi-weekly to inform inmates that AA is available to all who want it. Click on the link below to see the results.

<https://1drv.ms/p/s!ArbEZOOrocFb1ib1mL8QDimpa7cA>

### **Criminal Justice Partnership Meeting**

Dates for the next Criminal Justice Partnership Meetings are as follows:

Cambridge 9th September

Stirling 16th September

Swindon 21st October

**Editor's Note:** We would welcome any stories or articles from AA members willing to share their experience of life behind bars and how they found recovery. Also, the experiences of RPLOs within the prison system. Please email material to Adam: [beyondthebars@aamail.org](mailto:beyondthebars@aamail.org)