

Prisoners' rights: Optional Extra or Theological Imperative?

Bill Cave Conference Report (Thursday 3rd April 2014: Eurostar Paris/London)

The 48-hour IPCA Europe mini gathering in Strasbourg was amazing!

Credit for the idea belongs to Brice (Deymie). At our first steering committee (Paris /Jan 2013) he announced that we were going to have more meetings and that he had already booked the CIARUS Centre in Strasbourg! In saying yes to the idea I had no idea of the work that we would have to do to pull it off. I've written letters to the European Court and the Council of Europe, and made a couple of preliminary visits to Strasbourg, other colleagues have agonised with publicity, budgets and programmes.

My having enlisted the help of the European Court and the Committee for the Prevention of Torture my main worry was whether anybody would come. Forty-four colleagues from sixteen different countries made it to Strasbourg. Chaplaincy new-comers and old-hands, national organisers and establishment volunteers; three imams and a Hindu priest also asked if they could come to benefit from the opportunity.

There were a few hitches, such as the allocation of rooms and noisy streets, but generally speaking all went well. Although everybody coped with an English language event it would have been better if translation had been available. More time for prayer and reflection would also have been useful.

These were my highlights:

Christer Daelander's (Uniting Church in Sweden) presentation on Religious Freedom; without that freedom chaplains could not breathe and chaplaincy would not function.

Ryan van Eijk's (Holland) brilliant introduction to legal structures of the European Convention and theological imperatives of ministry.

Judge Ann Power-Forde's (European Court of Human Rights) presentation on prison-related case-law and her obvious determination that detained people should never be deprived of hope no matter how distant that hope might be.

Hugh Chetwynd's (Committee for the Prevention of Torture) tour de force in a long discussion on the work of the CPT and current issues of concern in European Prisons.

The contribution of the *Feltham imams*, both by their presence and their enthusiastic presentations of their work. Longer standing IPCA members will be familiar with the concept of Community Chaplaincy. It is alive and well in SW London!

What next?

The conference has reminded me that being concerned for human rights is essential in Prison Chaplaincy. The European Convention and the Court are the "pinnacle of the legal mountain" but the protection of rights is the responsibility of everybody working with detained

people. The court is a long-stop...far better if prisoners' rights are not infringed in the first place. A part of this will be continuing my own studies and personal development.

IPCA Europe? The steering-committee will look at the costs and the other lessons of Strasbourg 2014. We hope to meet in Poland next year and make a quiet visit to Auschwitz around the time of the 70th anniversary of its liberation in 1945. We have promised to make a priority of support for the IPCA Worldwide conference in Sydney (Sept 2015) and are planning an event in Cambridge in 2017. However a further "flash-mob" gathering for 2016, about one or more of the themes from our final Strasbourg session is also on the cards. Watch this space!!

Bill Cave