

The MU: Reaching out to families affected by imprisonment

October 2006

The MU: Who we are and what we do in prisons

The MU is a Christian organisation seeking to support families in 77 countries around the world. In the UK, over 1,000 MU volunteers work in 90 prisons, seeking to help families sustain and develop their relationships whilst parted by imprisonment.

Training and support: All MU volunteers who work in prisons are encouraged to access appropriate training, and work with the support of the prison chaplaincy team.

The following profiles offer a brief insight into just some of our work: to find out more or to be put in touch with MU volunteers working in a specific prison or area of the country, please email outreach@themothersunion.org

Supporting parents in prison: Ford Prison, Arundel, West Sussex

The MU started providing parenting sessions in Ford over six years ago.

The Education Department required a course of 30 hrs class work plus homework, and the work undertaken by those who participate is accredited by the Open College Network (OCN) at levels one and two.

The two-hour, weekly session is popular. The facilitators adopt a relaxed style of engagement with the prisoners, with everyone sharing, learning and laughing together.

Men of all faiths and non attend the sessions, which are enthusiastically supported by the Governor, Education Department and also the Chaplain.

MU volunteers are running parenting groups in a number of other prisons: all have had the opportunity to participate in the MU Parenting Programme for volunteer

parenting group facilitators, externally accredited by the OCN, London region, at levels two and three.

"I didn't have a very good parenting role model, so although I knew what I wanted to achieve, I wasn't confident about how to go about being a good parent or even if I could. Now I am a lot more confident."

Facilitating family contact time: A new MU prison visitor centre at Maidstone Prison, Kent

MU volunteers have this year been invited to open a visitor centre for the prison. Prison staff and local MU members have worked together to establish this centre that will open shortly, managed by the MU, using rooms in a church nearby.

In many other prisons, the MU are involved in prison visitor centres and visits halls, working in collaborative partnerships with other agencies.

Preparing people for release: Haverigg Prison, Millom, Carlisle

In Haverigg prison, the Education Department has invited the MU to provide sessions as part of a pre-release course. Prison staff asked the MU to focus on parenting.

The MU is currently piloting these sessions and has plans to develop them by inviting the prisoners' families to attend.

The MU will be evaluating this pilot and hope to provide a model that other groups of volunteers could offer in other prisons.

Prayer and fellowship: Holloway Prison, London

MU members are involved in around 19 women's prisons, or prisons that include

women, and most of these prisons offer friendship and fellowship groups facilitated by the MU, with the support of the prison Chaplain.

The first such group was established at Holloway, and the support that the MU offers to women there has continued to develop.

As well as the prayer and fellowship group at Holloway, MU members work in the Mother and Baby Unit, engaging with the mothers, and also taking the babies outside of the prison environment, so that they can have an experience of the outside world.

A national network: If, on their release, prisoners want to maintain contact with the MU or with a Christian group, the MU, in consultation with the prison Chaplain, will seek to identify a local group of MU members or a church that will extend an appropriate and friendly welcome, making use of the network of contacts that Alpha in prisons at HTB offers.

**Caring and listening:
Me2U: a support group set up by the MU
at Send Prison, Woking, Surrey**

This group has been established at the request of the chaplaincy team, to help address a range of needs expressed by the women: isolation, loneliness, feelings of loss and bereavement.

To help the women feel comfortable in the group, craft sessions are offered, with women invited to make greetings cards which they can then send to their families and friends.

The women enjoy meeting with each other in a relaxed environment, and particularly value talking with the volunteers, who are trained in listening skills. They feel that the volunteers treat them with respect and worth, are non-judgemental and bring a sense of the outside world into the prison. One prisoner wrote:

"When I come to a card making session, I leave feeling renewed and refreshed. It is nice to have somewhere to go where

you're not judged and where you are made to feel welcome and at ease."

**Reaching out to fathers:
A play session for fathers and their
children at Blakenhurst Prison, Redditch**

The central MU is working with members in Worcester on a pilot initiative: a part-time professional Family Matters Worker has been appointed by the MU to help the MU develop their work in four prisons: Blakenhurst, Brockhill, Hewell Grange and Long Lartin.

The MU, supported by the Family Matters Worker, have established a family bonding course, enabling fathers, their partners and their children to spend time together.

A father who attended these sessions wrote a journal of experiences, sharing this with the MU team:

"This is the first time my baby son has gone to sleep in my arms. When I get out of here I want to stay out, so that I can look after my family."

The course is being evaluated, and prison staff are keen to encourage the MU to run subsequent sessions.

**For further information contact the MU on
020 7222 5533 or email
outreach@themothersunion.org**