

# Healing on the inside

For Prisons Week (13-19 October) Major Carl Huggins (Leicester South) tells Shanelle Manderson about his work as a prison chaplain

‘HAPPY’ is probably not the first word that comes to mind when you think of prison, but that is how Major Carl Huggins describes HMP Leicester, a category B remand prison that houses male inmates awaiting a trial or sentencing hearing.

‘There is a good relationship between members of staff and prisoners,’ he says. ‘It has its challenges, but it’s a happy place to be.’

For just over a year, the Leicester South corps officer has been ministering to male prisoners one day a week. He is one of eight members of the chaplaincy team working across different religions. The duties are usually divided between them, starting with meeting new arrivals.

‘Prison can be a scary and intimidating place,’ explains Carl. ‘We spend some time with them asking if they have family. Sometimes, we’ll make phone calls on their behalf to let family members know they’ve had a good first night.’

The chaplaincy team also visits prisoners in the segregation and discharge units.

‘We’ll check that those being released have a place to stay or family to go to. If not, we try and help them out with resettlement. It can be quite daunting going out into the big world again because they’re so used to a set routine in the prison.’

Although some chaplains are faith specific, Carl is happy to talk to everyone.

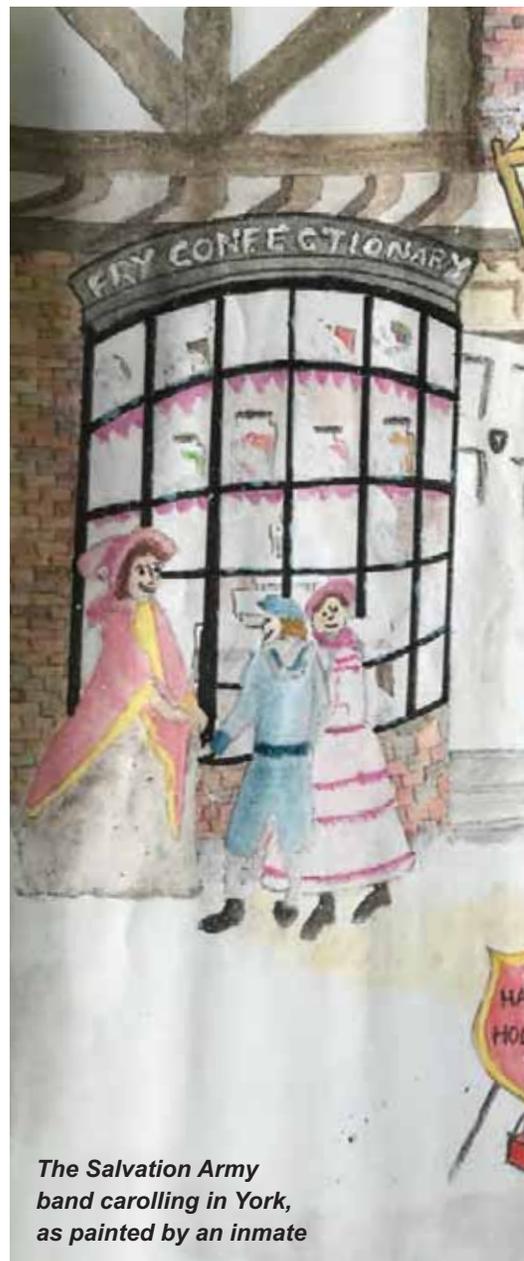


‘I believe, as a Christian, if someone is of a different faith I should respect them for who they are and what they believe, regardless of whether they’re in prison,’ he says. ‘For them to be open to a different faith is good as well, because it gives us an opportunity to hear each other’s side.’

Once Carl finds something in common with prisoners, such as football, it can be quite easy to build rapport. Loneliness and missing family are often struggles for inmates. It can be hard for those who do not have anybody, particularly when family members pass away and they are not allowed to go to the funeral.

In such instances, faith can be a great healer, as Carl says: ‘I’ve seen people come into a realisation of what faith can do for them and how much of a positive impact it can have on their everyday situation in prison. I’ve had chats with prisoners about going deeper in faith and how it can give them a better understanding of life and the impact their actions can have on them and their families.’

This is affirmed during chapel services led by the men, which Carl organises



*The Salvation Army band carolling in York, as painted by an inmate*

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once a month. Their fellowship includes Bible readings, songs and conversations over hot drinks about their hopes for the future. Some also ask for information about churches and corps as they continue their faith journey.

Although the men often respond to prayer and Scripture, sometimes it’s about being the gospel, not sharing it, reflects Carl: ‘It’s about showing that somebody does care in the way that I respond to them, because we have a prison system in some cases where



“My role is not to judge... it is to support them in trying to change”



it doesn't care for them.'

Some people may believe that prisoners do not deserve support, because they have committed serious crimes. Carl respects this view but insists that it is 'not his role to judge'.

'At the lowest times of my life I have been grateful for the support of my family and friends,' he explains. 'Many of the men I come into contact with don't have that, so my role is to offer love, and support them in trying to change so they can experience new life. If a prisoner comes to faith or is on a journey into faith, then I believe they can have new life in Jesus.'

Prison work is not without its challenging moments.

'My faith has really been tested,' says Carl. 'The things that I hear, see and have to read have caused my faith to develop immensely. I seek God's wisdom in all that I face.'

'Sometimes I have to put aside what people have done and trust in God to give me the right words at the right time. I'm also grateful we've got a good managing chaplain, who encourages and helps us.'

There are rewarding moments too, such as when Carl is able to help people through difficult times.

'I worked alongside a gentleman who was having some real issues with his family,' he shares. 'We were able to sit down and chat through them. I didn't get a chance to see him before he was transferred to another prison, but he painted me the most gorgeous scene of a street in York with a Salvation Army band playing (pictured above) and left a note that read: "Thank you for all you have done. You've done more than you think." When I look back at it, all I did was sit and listen.'

Carl sees his chaplaincy work as a

part of a wider corps mission. Leicester South ran the prison visitors' café for about seven years, and over the Christmas period the band was able to help with the prison carol service.

'It's about linking the corps with the prison,' Carl enthuses. 'It all becomes a part of the corps mission, not just my ministry. I'm grateful for the prayerful support from corps folk.'

'I ask for your prayers,' he adds. 'For prisoners, that God will equip them for the future and that the Holy Spirit can change them; for the people they've hurt or done something against; for the prisoners' families who can't see their loved ones; for staff, that God will protect them in all the situations they will face; and for the chaplaincy team, protection, wisdom and guidance.'

● Prayers for Prisons Week are available at [prisonsw.org](http://prisonsw.org)