

An unprecedented national online service from a prison was broadcast by the Church of England earlier this year bringing prisoners, their families and prison staff together during lockdown.

*The **Revd Helen Dearnley**, Anglican chaplaincy adviser for HM Prison and Probation Service, who led the service, describes its impact.*



The Covid-19 pandemic has made us think creatively and this was the first time that we had done anything like this. We wanted different prisons to take part and the service was broadcast from HMP Stocken in Rutland, HMP Low Newton in Durham – all women - and HMP Pentonville in London, a men’s prison.

We wanted the voices of the people who work in prison to be heard and for people to be given some idea of their largely hidden ministry. Prison staff, including chaplains, are Hidden Heroes and we must take every chance to celebrate them, like through this service, and the upcoming Hidden Heroes day on September 29.

During the service, there were readings by staff inside Pentonville prison and you could hear the background noise of prison life. The service heard reflections written by two prisoners, read by chaplains on their behalf.

Prisoners spoke of their joy at knowing their families had been watching and listening to what they had written. It was hugely exciting for them to feel heard. There was prisoners’ art displayed throughout the service and prayers were read that had been written by the women in Low Newton.

When the service was being broadcast, the chaplains in Low Newton were walking on the wings and as the hymns were being played, they could hear the sound of the women singing in their cells. Our job as chaplains is to bring hope and the service was a moment when that all came together.

There were 50,000 views of the service on Facebook and YouTube.



There are around 200 Church of England chaplains in the prison service but not all are full time and we would like to recruit more. It is very important to emphasise that not all are ordained. People can be prison chaplains if they are priests, deacons, readers or Church Army evangelists.

I think being a prison chaplain is a huge gift and privilege. It is about being alongside people at an absolutely critical moment of their lives, supporting people who have not always made the right decisions in their lives and have not embraced life in its fullness as they could have done. The work of the prison chaplain is to walk alongside them and help them to become who they can most richly be. Also in addition to all that we do, in working in prisons we are helping to reduce reoffending in the future.



- The service formed part of the Ministry of Justice's Hidden Heroes campaign highlighting the work of prison staff especially during the pandemic. A special day to mark their contribution will be held on September 29.

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