

A Celebration Of Human Dignity In Prison

November 2003

"No longer prisoners but people", was one of the opening remarks made by the Venerable David Fleming, Chaplain General HM Prisons, as he explained what this year's theme for Prisoners Week meant for him - "When one suffers, we all suffer. It is a reminder that Prisoners don't just disappear from sight, but are still people with their own needs." He pointed out that the 50,000 prisoners currently held in the UK all have their families, friends, prison officers and many others as part of their world. "We are all linked".

Venerable David Fleming was speaking at 'A Celebration of Human Dignity in Prison', held at the International Centre of the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University, Global Co-operation House, on Saturday 20th November in honour of Prisoners Week. Originated in 1975, the Week is a tribute in recognition of the human rights and needs of prisoners.

Although concern about the industrial relations situations prevented several prison inmates from joining us, "Nonetheless", as Gail Bradley, wife of David Bradley, Governor of Shrewsbury Prison and co-ordinator of the celebration pointed out, "It is advantageous to have an event which is community based, expressing the concern of the community at large for prisoners."

A video produced especially for the event by the Killing Time Studios, HMP Standford Hill, featured Prison Officer Graham Ashmore, describing its work as, "An oasis of positive thoughts and attitudes". The studios, built by prison officers and inmates, are maintained by the prisoners themselves who also work with groups of disabled people.

Several ex-offenders presented powerful statements of human dignity. Al, who had served a four year sentence and is now completing an arts degree, spoke of the immense benefit of the education he had

received in prison. His new found sense of dignity brought a lasting friendship with other inmates who respected and actively protected his right to study while in prison. Vocalist and guitarist Clive also performed, only one week into his release from HMP Standford Hill. Last year he joined the celebration as one of the lead singers in the band 'Killing Time'.

There was an international touch as well; an excerpt read from Brian Keenan's book, 'An Evil Cradling' and a message from inmates in Miami and Rio de Janeiro. Prison inmate Julian writes, "God's children are everywhere, in prison, out of prison; it does not really matter as long as there is understanding."

Susie Alexander, presented 'The Tree of life - earth bound by its roots and reaching for the sky' - a wall-hanging that three weeks ago was only a thought!, This was created by inmates in the Art Department of Gartree Prison. A Koestler Award winning poem, written by a Holloway Prisoner, was the subject of a powerful mime, performed by BK student Marneta Viegas, depicting the "Waiting in Silence" of a convicted prisoner on her reception into prison. The poem was read by Georgina Long, Meditation Teacher at HMP Gartree

Sister Jayanti, London Director of the Brahma Kumaris closed the afternoon, describing the earth as a blue pearl. "No one individual can say 'leave me alone, I exist independently'. We share one home, one word, we are one family."

The event was well supported by government and community based support organisations with representatives from the Inner London Probation Service, the Samaritans, the Howard League, the Prism Project and the Youth Justice Team. Several prison Governors and Chaplains were also present.