

An interview with former Strangeways Governor Brendan O’Friel

On 1 April 1990, a group of prisoners in Manchester’s Strangeways prison took control of the chapel in a demonstration about conditions and the often brutal and arbitrary treatment they suffered. Thus began the longest prison riot in UK history, lasting over three weeks. Images of the prisoners staging a rooftop protest dominated the media internationally.

Riots and disturbances followed in more prisons across the UK. The Government announced a public inquiry led by Lord Woolf. The Woolf Report concluded that alongside local triggers and circumstances, the riot’s root cause was an intolerable and inhumane system, not confined to Strangeways. Woolf recommended principles of decency and justice to underpin a major programme of prison reform. One of his central recommendations proved to be critical to the development of Pact’s work for the next thirty years: *“Better prospects for prisoners to maintain their links with families and the community....”*

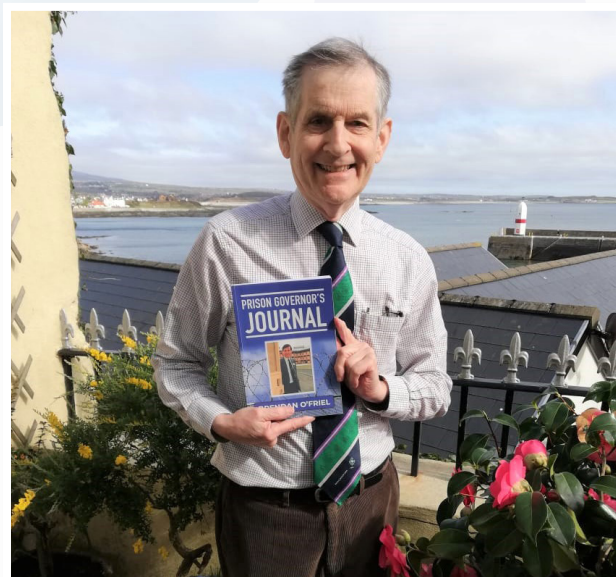
The Governor of HMP Strangeways was Brendan O’Friel, a progressive, reforming Governor working hard to improve conditions and staff culture. In his new book, *Prison Governor’s Journal*, O’Friel considers the impact of prison overcrowding and the lack of rehabilitative regimes on both staff and prisoners. He argues that the consequent inability to reduce reoffending generates continuing threats to public safety.

Pact’s Theresa Alessandro caught up with Brendan for an exclusive Fresh Start interview, capturing his reflections on Strangeways, his Catholic faith, and his insights for today’s political leadership.

Theresa: Brendan, tell us about the values you brought to the prison service drawn from your Catholic faith, education, and family.

Brendan: In my book, I describe the influence of faith in developing my values, including the need to give special attention to prisoners. The more I became involved with prisoners, the more I realised how the odds were stacked against them – often because of their upbringing and lack of opportunities.

To encourage change, staff needed to be valued, and the difficulties of their work appreciated – a priority not always understood by political and senior leaders.



My Jesuit education helped shape my values. Many individuals – including prisoners - played a part in developing my understanding of the challenges of working with offenders.

Theresa: Were those values tested during your career?

Brendan: Constantly and substantially. Perhaps the greatest challenge was the Strangeways riot, when the sight of the random, wanton destruction of improved facilities to benefit prisoners was particularly painful. Worse was the way some prisoners attacked fellow prisoners because of their alleged offences.

Theresa: Can you identify some encouraging positive changes which have lasted?

Brendan: Positive changes in staff-prisoner relationships are crucial to making progress. This is the bedrock for running safe prisons and encouraging prisoners to change and develop. Considerable progress has been made in recognising what needs to be delivered – but overcrowding and shortages of resources – especially experienced staff – have seriously hindered progress.

Locking up 80,000 prisoners is caused by excessive use of imprisonment, including the length of sentences, a failure to divert to alternative penalties, and a failure to deal with those with mental ill health appropriately.

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Theresa: Are there circumstances or attitudes in today's criminal justice sector that are reminiscent of those leading up to the riots in Strangeways and elsewhere?

Brendan: The failure to grapple with prison overcrowding increases the danger of prisoners reoffending after release. It is very difficult to run positive regimes in overcrowded prisons – and prisoners can deteriorate without them.

Insufficient attention is paid to the link between bad prison experiences and reoffending. It is too easy for political leaders of all parties to promise to be "tough on crime" without adequate knowledge of the consequences. I prefer Douglas Hurd's comment that "prison is an expensive way of making bad people worse".

Prison riots occur periodically – usually with deep underlying causes – and then a trigger event or events that spark a disturbance is often difficult to predict. The state of the prisons in 2023 provides the deep, underlying causes for disturbances – let us hope trigger events are avoided.

Theresa: Are there any examples from your experience where family relationships made a positive difference to someone in prison?

Brendan: I have seen many prisoners sustained by family support and who regard the opportunity to return to a supportive family as being of great value to their self-belief and an incentive to improve themselves for their life after discharge.

Theresa: How do you think parish communities might play a role in this work?

Brendan: The most important approach by a parish – individually and collectively – is to treat any former prisoner as an individual by providing a welcome into the parish community. Building supportive relationships is vital – just knowing that they will be welcomed will do much to sustain a former prisoner in those first few months after release.

'This day...with me...in Paradise' (Luke 23:43): two ways to mark Lent 2023

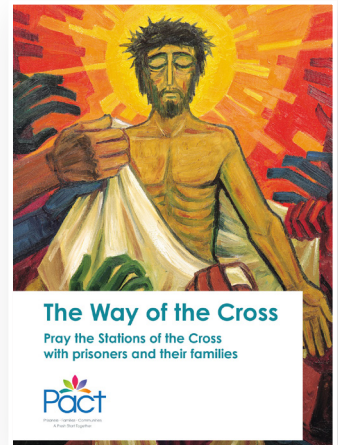
Pope Francis calls us to listen to each other, especially those 'on the margins'. Pact's beautiful Stations of the Cross liturgy shares the voices of prisoners and their families. Bishop Richard Moth used this liturgy in the chapel at women's prison, HMP Send. The women read the scripture texts while Bishop Richard read the words of prisoners. Some of the women were very moved and took copies back to their cells to pray through the liturgy again.

We have now produced a booklet featuring this text, enhanced with beautiful Stations of the Cross images from the community at Turvey Abbey, used with permission. We will share the booklets with the women at HMP Send – and then with prison chaplains.

You can download the liturgy text from our website (<https://www.prisonadvice.org.uk>) and let the voices of prisoners and their families be heard in your parish. **Contact us if you would like to obtain a copy of the booklet – 07710 170 942 or fresh.start@prisonadvice.org.uk**

Last year, we organised a parish-prison pilgrimage. We would love to support you in organising your own this year. If your local prison is in a town, gather a small group of walkers and make a pilgrimage there. Walkers may like to make a donation to Pact's work.

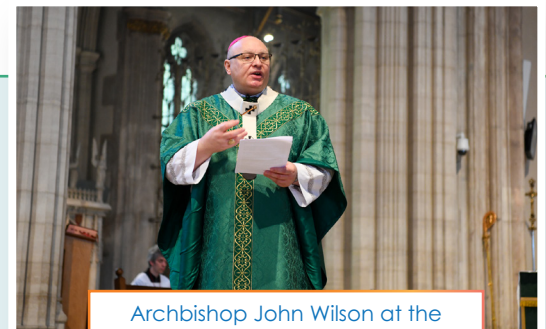
You can find more details on our website or contact us for support at [fresh.start@prisonadvice.org.uk](https://www.fresh.start@prisonadvice.org.uk). We could have a welcome cup of tea ready for you at the prison's Visitors' Centre!



Save the date for Prisoners' Sunday: 8 October 2023

Prisoners' Sunday marks the beginning of Prisons Week (8th – 14th October 2023). A time when parishes in England and Wales are encouraged to hold in their hearts and minds prisoners, people with convictions and their families.

Each year we are privileged to receive tremendous support from Catholic parishes. Last year, Bishops in the Dioceses of Arundel and Brighton, Nottingham, Southwark and Wrexham celebrated Cathedral Prisoners' Sunday Masses. At the Southwark Cathedral Mass, in a powerful and moving homily, Archbishop John Wilson said, **"We each need to play our part in helping people in prison find a new beginning because it makes the world better for everyone."** After Mass, the Pact team spoke with parishioners about our work and ways to get involved.



Archbishop John Wilson at the Southwark Cathedral Mass

Hope for Jacob

Jacob* is a young man in a (youth) prison. As a teenager, he was lured into a street gang and was at the scene when another young man was fatally stabbed. He will transfer to an adult prison in a few years to complete his sentence.

Jacob grew up in and out of the care system. His mum lived with addiction and mental ill health, and he never knew his dad. On family visit days, Jacob stays in his cell. He feels his life is over, and he has begun to self-harm.

A few weeks ago, a prison chaplain introduced Jacob to Pact's 'Restore' project, and our caseworker, Liz*. Trusting people is hard for Jacob, so he was slow to open up. But Liz explained who Pact are and that she could offer him support - if he wanted. After a while, Jacob told Liz that he felt frightened and alone. Although he was not the one who killed the other boy, he feels the horror and guilt of it all the same. He wants to die.

Liz listened. Jacob told her that he had a brother, but they had been separated when they were taken into care. Liz spent the next two weeks tracing Jacob's brother. Sadly, he is also in prison. But she helped Jacob write a letter to him, the first he had ever written. Liz and colleagues are

also arranging a secure video call to reunite the brothers, but there is a long way to go.

Liz has carefully discussed with Jacob the many reasons why he might not get a reply from his brother, how he will cope with that, and how she and chaplaincy can support him if that happens. It is important Jacob can manage his expectations and be prepared. Of course, we hope his brother will respond. Having a Pact colleague in the brother's prison means that our team can speak with him face-to-face about how much it would mean to Jacob to hear from him. Jacob's brother will be released from prison in a few months.

At the time of writing this, Jacob is waiting for a reply. He hopes there might be one person in the world who he can connect with - someone he can call family - outside the prison walls, one person who might care. Although there is no happy ending yet, for now, things are better for him, and he has stopped self-harming. We are hopeful too. And we know that your continued support can bring hope to many more young men like Jacob in the year to come.

**name changed to protect anonymity*

Operation Elf reaches almost 2,000 children

We are hugely grateful for the heart-warming response to Operation Elf last Christmas.

One colleague at HMP Elmley told us how the scheme helps to strengthen family bonds:

"73 children at our prison were overjoyed to receive presents 'from dad'. Yesterday, a mother approached me in the tea bar to say thank you. The present her daughter valued the most was the Barbie "her daddy had bought for her.""



Gift cards donated by the parishes of St Ann's, Banstead and St Francis Catholic School, Caterham

A very warm thank you to everyone involved!

Other parishes welcomed Pact volunteers and staff to speak to congregations. It is a joy for us to speak to our community about the difference Pact's work is making to prisoners & their families. One of our volunteers said, **"Marking Prisoners' Sunday was a great experience, and I'm reconnecting with faith as a result. Thank you for this wonderful opportunity."**

If you'd like someone to speak at your church, we would love to hear from you. Email fresh.start@prisonadvice.org.uk

**Our Catholic Community donated an incredible £29,000 for Prisoners' Sunday in 2022, donations continue to be made by parishes and individuals.
THANK YOU!**

Pact report shows that involving families in prison healthcare would save lives and cut crime

Involving families more proactively in prisoners' healthcare would reduce deaths in custody, relieve pressure on the NHS and criminal justice system, and cut crime, according to Pact's latest report: Nobody's Listening.

We spoke to families whose loved one in prison lives with mental or physical ill health and asked them to share their experiences of caring 'through the bars'. Nobody's Listening finds that when families are involved in prisoners' healthcare, everyone benefits - prisoners, their families, the criminal justice system and the NHS.

However, the report concludes that families and significant others are often locked out of a system that fails to value their role as carers. It makes several recommendations to improve how healthcare providers and prisons can proactively involve families in their loved one's care and improve outcomes for all involved. You can read the full report at www.prisonadvice.org.uk/nobodys-listening or contact us at fresh.start@prisonadvice.org.uk if you'd like a printed copy.

Thank you, Denis: remembering prisoners and their families with a legacy gift

'Remember those in prison as though you were bound with them.' (Hebrews 13:3)

Denis Hunt (pictured) began supporting our work in 1988 and, for more than 34 years, demonstrated his firm commitment to prisoners and their families. Last year, Denis sadly passed away at the age of 96. He was a man of deep faith. As well as his interest in caring for families affected by imprisonment, he was a stalwart supporter of his local theatre, The Loft, and served them in a number of key roles, including as Artistic Director.

Denis will continue to bring hope and light to people in prison as he chose to remember prisoners and their families by leaving a gift in his will to Pact. We are incredibly grateful for his support. Requiescat in Pace.



If you would like more information about remembering Pact in your will, you can contact us by email at fresh.start@prisonadvice.org.uk or by phone on 07710 170 942.

Save
the
date

18th February & 29th March
JustPeople Online Workshop

22th April
Plymouth Newton Abbot Roadshow

18th March
Plymouth Poole Roadshow

24th May
Sir Harold Hood Memorial Lecture, London



Pact is the national Catholic charity supporting prisoners, people with convictions and their children and families. We provide caring and life-changing services at every stage of the criminal justice process: in court, in prison, on release, and in the community.

Pact's journey began in 1898 as the Catholic Prisoners' Aid Society and our vision, mission and values are taken directly from Catholic Social Teaching, Scripture and the tradition of the Church. We believe in a society in which justice is understood as a process of restoration and healing, in which prisons are used sparingly and as places of learning and rehabilitation, and in which the innate dignity and worth of every human being is valued. We work for the common good of Society, taking a public-health based approach that intersects criminal justice, child and family welfare, mental health, wellbeing provision and health & social care.

Contact Us:

Website: www.prisonadvice.org.uk

Email: parish.action@prisonadvice.org.uk



The Prisoners' Families Helpline offers support for families who have a loved one in contact with the criminal justice system.

www.prisonersfamilies.org

member
caritas
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Pact is registered in England and Wales as a charity (no. 219278) and a company limited by guarantee (no.356443)