

# Leeds takes next steps in framing new approach to criminal justice



## Justice and Mercy: your next step

### Rev. Dr. Joseph D Cortis

*Justice and Mercy: Your Next Step* was the title of the open meeting of lay faithful and clergy which Caritas Leeds held on 16th October to mark Prisoners' Week 2021. It followed a virtual event 12 months earlier when the Criminal Justice Commission launched its report, under the title of Justice and Mercy, with recommendations for action and on-line resources gathered from a two-year period of listening and learning from people involved in the criminal justice system in the area covered by the Diocese of Leeds.

Those involved included prisoners, ex-offenders, staff working within the criminal justice system and extensive number of third sector agencies working with prisoners, ex-offenders, families and victims of crime.

This commission aimed: 'to increase knowledge and understanding among Catholics of the UK's criminal justice system and the experiences of people in our Diocese who encounter it; explore and reflect on approaches to restorative justice; encourage Catholics to take more action to support people encountering the criminal justice system and address the injustices which they may face; make practical recommendations for action and change.'

These aims fit well with the aims of Caritas Leeds, which was launched in September 2017 to: 'provide a strong and coherent voice on important social issues for the Diocese of Leeds; identify and respond to areas of need within the Diocese; encourage, promote and facilitate social action'.

The event opened with a participative themed liturgy on Justice and Mercy which included scripture readings, litany for restorative justice and selections from Pope Francis' encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (2020).

In the message, Bishop Marcus Stock told those at the meeting: 'I hope that your prayers, presentations and conversations will help the important work you have already begun to continue and to assist those who have been wronged to find healing and peace, and those who have committed offences to receive and accept forgiveness.'

'Crime has far-reaching consequences for victims and for offenders and their families. In



Pictured at the event are, from left to right: Tom Chigbo (co-chair of the Commission); Rev. Dr. Joseph D Cortis, Caritas Leeds co-ordinator and co-chair of the commission; Beverly Adams (principal engagement officer, West Yorkshire Police); Inspector Michael Cox (West Yorkshire Police) and Alison Lowe (Deputy Mayor of the West Yorkshire Combined Authority).

helping to create opportunities for encounter and practical ways in which victims and offenders can emerge from their sufferings, you are helping to bring Christ's healing love into our society'.

The gathering also heard from Rt. Hon. Yvette Cooper MP, Chair of the House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee, who said: 'There are huge difficulties for people engaging with the criminal justice system. Victims and their families are often in huge need of support and struggle to get justice. Turning round the lives of ex-offenders, tackling addiction and preventing people reoffending are all hard but vital. As Chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee, I know how difficult many people find the criminal justice system and that's why it is so welcome that Caritas Leeds are looking at how churches and community organisations can work with people across Yorkshire on these difficult issues.'

Bishop Richard Moth, the Liaison Bishop for Prisons, emphasised the timeliness of this event now that the Covid 19 restrictions are slowly being reduced. He commented on the negative impact the pandemic has had on prison communities, families and volunteers and congratulated the Diocese of Leeds for the work of this commission.

Alison Lowe, Deputy Mayor of West Yorkshire Combined-Authority with specific responsibilities for policing and crime, was one of those attending this event and she warmly welcomed the progress made with the implementation of the recommendations for action so far, and encouraged clergy and parishioners to engage in the public consultation currently being carried out across the county on policing and crime. She felt confident that the initiative which has been

developed between Caritas Leeds and the West Yorkshire Police will be effective, and bear fruit in the future.

The report had four main recommendations. This update shows how the Commission progressed in implementing them, despite the challenges of working during a pandemic:

### 1. Promote actions that raise awareness and inspire more Catholics to work for positive changes in the criminal justice system

Copies of the report were circulated to all MPs within the Diocese of Leeds, to all the Catholic bishops of England and Wales, prison governors and prison chaplains within our area, leaders of local government, third sector agencies, Chief Constables and Police and Crime Commissioners for West and North Yorkshire.

We held virtual workshops covering: overview of the criminal justice system, life in prison, life after prison, and restorative justice. Most of these workshops are accessible through our website.

We are promoting meetings of prison chaplains and prison visitors with input from members of the Caritas Leeds Criminal Justice Commission.

In addition, the group is engaged with deaneries to promote and arrange opportunities for people with lived experience of the criminal justice system to share their testimonies with parishes and diocesan organisations, and build relationships for possible future support, and access to church properties for agencies working within the field.

### 2. Encourage participation of parishes or deaneries in practical local action

Parishes have been encouraged to

consider adopting at least one public agency or third sector organisation working within the criminal justice system, and to develop an ongoing relationship with them.

We developed specific links with third sector agencies with a focus on finding training, volunteering opportunities or work for ex-prisoners.

### 3. Foster training and capacity building activities to equip clergy and lay people with the skills and confidence to act as champions for justice and mercy, and ensure that the Catholic Church is an effective partner for organisations working within the criminal justice system

We are working to inform the clergy about restorative justice, and to provide information on addiction and mental health to a wider audience, as these are major challenges within the current criminal justice system and become causes of re-offending. We continue to plan to provide training for lay Catholics in campaigning, media engagement and community organising to give them the skills and confidence to participate in local decision making, scrutiny forums, and to advocate for positive change in the criminal justice system.

The 'FaithWorks FrameWork' has been developed through a strong partnership between Caritas Leeds and West Yorkshire Police, and it was launched at the Justice and Mercy event. This initiative consists of four engaging workshops using a hybrid model of in-person and online delivery at two Catholic secondary schools between November 2021 and March 2022. The aim of these workshops is to raise awareness about preventable pathways to criminal behaviour through a specific focus on early childhood experiences, exploitation and violence. Each workshop will have a

scriptural and relevant Catholic social teaching base to stress the motto of Caritas Leeds: 'Faith through Loving Service'.

The last workshop will focus on a Call to Action addressing how individuals and groups can take positive action in their community, parish or school.

Beverly Adams, the principal community engagement officer for West Yorkshire Police who collaborated in the development of this framework, said: "I was truly inspired by the Caritas Leeds Justice and Mercy Report, and the opportunity not only to engage with a variety of Catholic stakeholders, but work together to protect vulnerable people. This is just the beginning of what I hope will be a very positive relationship between the Catholic and wider faith communities within West Yorkshire."

Superintendent Fiona Gaffney said: 'By working together with our Faith communities we have the opportunity to protect some of the most vulnerable people in society by intervening early with those at risk of being exploited or drawn into criminality.'

### 4. Support reforms which build a criminal justice system that delivers both justice and mercy.

Work is ongoing in this area but some basic information has been produced on the 'Ban the Box' Campaign (the campaign to increase opportunities for people with criminal convictions to compete for jobs by not having to tick a box on application forms stating they have convictions), which will be shared with Catholic employers and business owners. Work continues as part of the diocese's engagement with Leeds Citizens, a Chapter of Citizens UK, in their campaigns which have direct relevance to our area of focus such as mental health provision, the real living wage, and Settle our Status.

The second part of the event was an opportunity for attendees and stall holders to network, raise awareness about their services and learn from each other. At this event we had representation from: West Yorkshire Police Community Engagement Unit, PACT; National St Vincent de Paul Society, St George's Crypt, New Wortley Community Centre, Victim Support, Restorative Solutions, Ingeus, West Yorkshire Community Chaplaincy resettlement, St John's Bail Hostel and SPACE (Stop and Prevent Adolescent Criminal Exploitation).

For further information see [www.dioceseofleeds.org.uk/caritas/](http://www.dioceseofleeds.org.uk/caritas/)

**Rev. Dr. Joseph D Cortis, is the co-ordinator for Caritas Leeds and co-chair of the Caritas Leeds Criminal Justice Inquiry**