

BRADFORD COURT CHAPLAINCY SERVICE

Dear Reader/Brothers and Sisters in Christ

A friend rang me this morning and wished me a Happy Palm Sunday remembering the occasion when we visited Bethlehem and Jerusalem on Palm Sunday some years ago. I've followed Alan's/Margaret's/Julia's lovely service this morning (thankyou) and find my thoughts turning to the Bradford Court Chaplaincy Service (BCCS) where I work as a volunteer as I sit in my garden – hopefully seeing more flowers than weeds! I know that many of you volunteer in a variety of different ways and settings but thought I would offer to share my thoughts with you and hope you find them of interest.

Perhaps you wonder what an average day is like – difficult because there's no such thing. Maybe you wonder if all chaplaincy services are similar – no court isn't, so here goes...

A little background

BCCS was first established ten years ago and was the first full-time court chaplaincy service in the country. BCCS staff and volunteers work in Crown (criminal), County (civil) and Magistrates courts. We simply have one role so you may think it's easy – we're there to offer support, guidance and assistance to those attending court. Of course, we have some guiding principles:-

- We are there for everyone, defendants, their families/friends/supporters, visitors, staff, sub-contractors and, most importantly, anyone who needs us.
- We are also there for everyone regardless of their faith, or value system or non-belief.
- We don't judge, thankfully that is the role of Members of the Bench and the Judiciary.
- We maintain total and absolute confidentiality, whatever a client chooses to share with a volunteer stays between them.
- We are completely independent of Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunal Service.

So, what do we do?

We LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN again and then listen some more. Sometimes we may just sit alongside a client and there is no discussion but we're there – a presence of independent Love in an environment that almost everyone finds extremely challenging. Sometimes we explain the process, what to expect, the court layout, what happens when a defendant is taken into court. Sometimes (in Magistrates Court) we will help a defendant complete a means form – quite challenging when neither the defendant or volunteer speak the same language but somehow or other we get by. If a defendant or their supporters wish, we are allowed to accompany them into court but are not allowed to speak but we can be (and are) a reassuring presence – or more simply a friendly face. We can and do signpost defendants on to other agencies, sometimes ringing and making appointments. Sometimes the Magistrates will ask that we are called into court if a defendant is distressed to calm and support them. Alternatively, sometimes they will ask that we meet with them outside the court (but within the court building) to offer help with any particular need that has become apparent during the case (for example, debt issues).

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Who comes to court?

Anyone and everyone. The youngest people I've seen (three) in (Magistrates) court were a week old (and no, in case you wondered they weren't triplets), the eldest person I've supported was an octogenarian. Since the closure of some/all Of Calderdale's courts many of these cases come to Bradford. Think about it – maybe you live in the Todmorden area. You have to get a bus/train into Todmorden, then another bus/train to Bradford, then find your way to the court building. It's a freezing cold, wet and wild morning, your letter tells you to be in court for 0930, the train/bus is delayed or is cancelled. Your anxiety level is probably now very close to being "through the roof". All West Yorkshire allegations of motoring misdemeanours (speeding, driving without insurance, driving "over the prescribed limit") are heard in Bradford and most, if not all, allegations of domestic violence. Sadly, there are also many other reasons why someone may be required to attend court. Perhaps it's alleged that they have broken the terms of a formal order previously given (for example, probation, restraint, non-molestation etc), issues relating to addiction (alcohol, drugs – everything up to and including class A drugs), unpaid fines or council/business tax accounts.

How do people present?

In every conceivable way and from every possible circumstance or situation. Obviously, confidentiality does not permit me to quote specifics, you'll just have to trust me on this one. Everything from utter and abject terror to the misplaced arrogant confidence of youth. (Thoughts of John Betjeman's Christmas poem when he referred to 'Loutish lads remember Dad' come to mind). All this before defendants and their supporters undergo the registration process. People who are homeless, people experiencing some form of addiction, people from throughout the country, because if an alleged offence has taken place in the Bradford district it will be heard in the Bradford court. Defendants from as far away as the south coast to the north of Scotland. People who travel either in their own or a friend's vehicle or on an overnight train or bus arriving at a station at, say 0300 hours in the morning then just sitting waiting for a connection. Then when you finally arrive you go through airport standard security checks, pockets emptied, bottles of water have to be tested by defendants and they haven't even got into court yet! Let's face it, we all have the potential for fragility, we're all capable of making mistakes but it doesn't matter whether it was a mistake or not, if the decision of the Members of the Bench/Judiciary is guilty, justice has to be administered on behalf of the community.

Consequences/Impact

Justice administered may be a fine. Fines can have a devastating impact, after all if you're attending court for unpaid fines/council/business tax default in the first place, it's likely that you are in some sort of financial difficulty. However, that may be the required form of sentence within the sentencing guidelines available to the Magistrates. For Council Tax default it could, ultimately, be a custodial sentence. With regard to a motoring allegation, a sentence may be disqualification from driving (as serious as it gets if that's your job – huge consequences, job loss, maybe loss of your home – think about the further implications of that). Alternatively, if the allegation is a different matter, it may be a formal order (probation, restraint etc) or a custodial sentence.

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Yes, I've sat behind defendants in court and seen them handcuffed and taken to the cells at the start of their journey to prison. Yes, I've held their relatives in my arms offering comfort and consolation. This is the time of complete and utter desperation, devastation and desolation, their loved one in prison. Even if they know a prison sentence is possible, no-one is ever prepared for it. BCCS is no sexy, fluffy bunny charity, this is real life with all of its horrendous, tough, harsh, red-raw difficulties and complexities. Regardless of the court decision, clients are sometimes extremely and, frankly embarrassingly, grateful. Their gratitude may take the form of a hug. This is no "light touch" air kiss type hug. Do you remember when you were young and everything seemed to be wrong with your world. Perhaps you gave your teddy a hug because whilst no-one else understood, you told teddy your fears, your worries, your distress, because Teddy understood. . . . That's the sort of life-affirming and life-enhancing hug that we sometimes receive.

How did my volunteering come about?

When my working life of over four decades finished, I knew I both wanted and needed to do something of value, something that mattered, something to give something back, I know many others feel the same, after all there is a huge culture of volunteering in the UK. I didn't know what it might be and then a friend asked if I'd thought about BCCS saying they thought my robust compassion might be useful! (Not sure what that says about me!) I prayed, took my courage in my hands and explored the website and applied. I was accepted and have been volunteering for several years. I know I'm incredibly fortunate to be allowed to work with the Chaplaincy Service. To be with people who are both vulnerable and others who may be in a position of enormous vulnerability is a total and absolute honour and privilege beyond measure. Pre-chaplaincy, (in one job I had) I remember a former work colleague many years ago saying that when their boss said it was backs against the wall, they were never sure it was backs against the same wall. Well, it couldn't be more different in chaplaincy. The trustees, the part-time administrator and part-time chaplain all do a wonderful and incredible job in the most trying of circumstances. They all, together with colleague volunteers, support every volunteer. At the start of a shift, I'll try to remember the prayer of Lord Astley at the Battle of Edgehill 1642 "Lord, thou knowest how busy I must be today, If I forget thee, do not thou forget me." When I'm supporting clients, sometimes a verse from a hymn may come to mind, I'm often drawn to a verse from the hymn St Patrick's Breastplate: -

Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger, Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

This article has been submitted on behalf of Bradford Court Chaplaincy Service, the need for absolute confidentiality of all staff and volunteers is absolutely paramount.

If interested, further details can be obtained either from the website www.bradfordcourtchaplaincy.org.uk or by emailing info@bradfordcourtchaplaincy.org.uk

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In closing I can only offer you the Chaplaincy Prayer.

Almighty God / Heavenly Father, we hold before you today all who must attend court in Bradford, for whatever reason, especially those who have serious problems and all in distress. We ask that you might guide them to the Chaplaincy team.

Please bless the "Assist" Team, Volunteers and Staff. Help them to offer support to all in need, especially those who will go to prison, victims and families and friends of all involved.

Please bless and guide all those involved in the criminal justice system: police officers, prosecutors, advocates, all court staff, legal advisers, custody and security officers, catering staff, cleaners and especially all who work towards the rehabilitation of offenders.

*We give thanks for all who offer time, prayer and financial support and we pray that they may know your blessings. **Amen***

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