

PRISON DIALOGUE's TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY EVENT
WED 4TH SEPT 2013

To mark twenty years since the first Dialogue held in a prison, which took place in HMP Whitemoor (a high and maximum security prison in Cambridgeshire, England) on September 7th 1993, Prison Dialogue held a 20th anniversary event at the Malmaison hotel in Oxford. The venue was chosen principally because the building had previously been the local Oxford prison before its conversion recently into a hotel. 40 people attended, all of whom have participated at different stages in the evolution of the Charity and the wide array of different initiatives it has undertaken during its twenty year existence. These included a representative of the US National Institute of Corrections, indicating the international reach of the charity's activities, and a former prisoner who had participated in the early Dialogues at HMP Whitemoor.

Guests were welcomed to the gathering by Chris Marks, the longest serving Trustee of the Charity, whose involvement dates back to the very early Prison Dialogue work (prior to the formation of the Charity itself). This was followed by introductory remarks from Peter Garrett, the Director and founder of Prison Dialogue, who acknowledged in particular the contribution of three people in developing the initial ideas on which prison dialogue is based, namely: the physicist David Bohm, whose thinking around the fragmentation of thought led him to identify the importance of Dialogue as a means of overcoming such fragmentation; the psychiatrist Patrick De Mare, who in his work on group psychotherapy helped demonstrate the socio-therapeutic contribution Dialogue can provide; and probation officer Dave Parsons, who was based at Whitemoor prison and saw the potential for the use of Dialogue in the fractured prison environment, and was instrumental in the launch of the earliest Prison Dialogue sessions at HMP Whitemoor.

The core part of the meeting was divided into four main sections, each representing a different phase of Prison Dialogue's development that had a different emphasis in terms of the particular nature of the activities undertaken. These sessions also provided the opportunity to acknowledge the contributions made by different people as the Charity evolved, and for those attendees who had participated in the different pieces of work to provide their own reflections (some of which were then also recorded for potential future use as part of the documented record - see below).

The first session was focused on the original HMP Whitemoor and HMP Long Lartin Prison Dialogues, which were aimed principally at improving relationships between prisoners and prison staff. This was followed by a second session that looked at subsequent activities undertaken in UK prisons to affect culture through the use of dialogue to address organisational needs and opportunities, which still involved work with prisoners and staff, but also prison management and other employees. Participants described their experiences of Prison Dialogue's work including performance improvement initiatives in struggling prisons, training in the use of Dialogue and 'dialogic' skills for prison personnel, specifically targeted work to help different prisons deal with high priority and intractable challenges facing them, and more recently, active participation in support of the smooth transition of HMP Birmingham (a local prison) from the public to the private sector, and in the introduction of small group dialogues involving prisoners and wing staff - called 'Learning Circles' - as a core part of the prison's Personal Officer routine at the newly opened HMP Oakwood prison.

The third session was organised around the wider community and 'Threshold Dialogue' work (so-called because its particular emphasis was on bringing together the many different participants involved prior to and then in the aftermath of a prisoner's release – when they passed through the prison gate and over the prison threshold). This included an illustration of the 'Offender Journey' walk-through process, which provides a way of representing the different experiences undergone by someone entering, living in and then being released from prison, as well as resettlement in the community, and the crises faced on that journey. It reveals the challenges of engaging with the various individuals and organisations with whom offenders may have contact along their journey and the role that organisations play in overall progress.

The fourth session focused on the international activities undertaken by the Charity. Notable was Prison Dialogue's work at a state-wide level in the US and current leading role in a co-ordinated effort by the Virginia Department of Corrections to transform its activities (including both prisons and probation) under the banner of 'creating a Healing Environment' in order to realise the State Governor's Virginia Adult Re-entry Initiative strategic goals.

Formal proceedings concluded with all participants providing some brief reflections on the day, particularly in relation to the question of how the charity can best build on the achievements of the past 20 years, and the deep understanding of the operations of prisons and the wider criminal justice system which it has been able to establish as a result of these. One way to look at the body of work undertaken by Prison Dialogue (all of which has been extensively documented) is as a long-term piece of 'Action Research', and in keeping with this, all attendees were provided with a booklet containing over 40 short case studies, one for each of the different activities and projects undertaken by Prison Dialogue over the course of its existence. It is the intention over the coming weeks to publish these on the Prison Dialogue website. There was general acknowledgement among the attendees of the enormous value of the Prison Dialogue work to date, and the credibility that the Charity had been able to establish through this work. This provides a firm foundation upon which it can build further in future, and seek to extend its impact and reach - with a key challenge being around the practicalities of how best to achieve this. One important practical measure being pursued by the charity currently is to enable interested organisations and parties to become 'Associates' of Prison Dialogue, and be trained in the skills required to lead successful Dialogue sessions in prisons and other parts of the Criminal Justice System. The 20th Anniversary meeting closed with an invitation to all attendees who were interested in so doing to become Associates of the Charity in this way. An inaugural meeting will be held at Chipping Campden on 14th Nov'13 to determine the basis of Associate Membership.