

## **CS3: HMP WHITEMOOR EXTREME SERIAL OFFENDERS DIALOGUES**

**by Peter Garrett**

### **Context**

Dialogue had already been introduced into HMP Whitemoor, a high and maximum security prison in Cambridgeshire, England, that had 4 wings (housing units) of around 110 prisoners each. A weekly Dialogue Group was started on C & D Wings in Sept'93 (averaging 17 participants), and a second Dialogue Group for Vulnerable Prisoners (mainly sex offenders) on A & B Wings in Sept'94 (averaging 25 participants). In Aug'95 Prison Dialogue (PD) put a proposal to the Head of Residence for wing-based Dialogues on all four wings in anticipation of creating a therapeutic community on A Wing in collaboration with HMP Grendon. This included a request for the profiling of staff (rather than their attending on a voluntary basis) and the building sound-proofed meeting rooms on the wings large enough to accommodate over 25 people.

### **Aims and Objectives**

The prison was impressed by the remarkable popularity of the Dialogue Groups amongst the prisoners over the previous two years and wanted to support the overall development of Dialogue in the prison despite lack of funding. PD proposed wing-based Dialogue Groups to make Dialogue more visible and accessible to those prisoners who had not as yet participated by making their way off their wing to the meeting room in the separate chapel area. It was seen as a first step of deeper engagement in order for the Dialogues to begin having a socio-therapeutic impact in the more private domestic areas where prisoners live.

### **Method: Activity, Participants and Duration**

The weekly wing-based Dialogue Group began on Tuesday evenings on A Wing in May'96 and ran for 12 mths. This was during a period of free association each day for the prisoners on that wing. The small meeting room (which could only seat 10 people comfortably) was on the wing in sight of the landings and prison cells. Through a glass window in the meeting room door prisoners could see the meetings taking place, and they were free to participate if they chose to do so. The Dialogues were facilitated by PD, with support from a prison-

based Probation Officer and the occasional involvement of a uniformed prison officer and/or a PD volunteer. It happened that the first Dialogue attracted three high-profile prisoners, each of whom was a serious serial offender – two were serial rapists (with indeterminate sentences) and the third was a serial murderer (with a natural life sentence and would therefore never be released from prison). This had the impact of discouraging other prisoners from joining the Dialogues unless they were from the minority who themselves had similarly 'heavy weight' sentences and reputations. Other prisoners did join the group over the months, perhaps a dozen or more at different times, including several serial paedophiles. The group ran for a year, until April'97 with an average attendance of 7 (the smallest was group was 4 and the largest was 11 participants) of whom 5 on average were prisoners. There was at least one member of prison staff present in every Dialogue session.

Notes and records were kept of all sessions but there were no publicly displayed reports of these Dialogues. As in all Dialogues held at HMP Whitemoor, there was an open policy about incrimination. The facilitator made clear at the outset of each meeting that if offenders talked about things that suggested any risk to security, the details would be reported to Security in the normal way. Also, if prisoners were in danger of incriminating themselves by talking about details of specific crimes then they were openly challenged by the facilitator about whether or not they wanted to proceed, and that if they did those details would be reported to the Police. These, of course, were commonly understood boundaries in a high security prison but in the Dialogue Groups the facilitator was quite transparent about it.

This was a challenging group for two reasons. Firstly, each Tuesday the facilitator (Peter Garrett) had already facilitated the large chapel-based Dialogue Groups for 2 hrs in the morning (for C & D Wings) and 2 hrs in the afternoon (for A & B Wings), before facilitating this third and more intense group in the evening.

Secondly, the seriousness of the offences committed by all the participating prisoners resulted in many invaluable but deeply disturbing enquiries. A small group of regulars frequented the group and it became evident over the weeks of Dialogue that these particular prisoners had themselves been badly abused in childhood (eg molested in infancy, gang raped as children, etc). It also became apparent that the serial rapists had been caught and sentenced for only a very small fraction of the rapes that they had committed (one claimed

only 5 out of scores), that they hoped to be caught as they continued to commit their offences, that for some of them their sequence of rapes in time led to murder, and that were they released they would probably continue to commit the most serious offences. These offenders were known to be high risk and were not due for release in the near future. They had already done the Sex Offender Treatment Programme (SOTP) but had not found a way of changing their future lives. What was apparent in the Dialogic enquiries was that an 'innocent' (pre-abuse) aspect of their identity was surfacing, and that from this identity their past behaviour was repugnant to them. One year was not adequate to address a lifetime of abuse, but the beginning of a powerful remedial treatment certainly appeared to be taking form.

### **Outcomes**

The wing-based Dialogue group was highly constrained by its starting group of participants, and did not develop into the full socio-therapeutic impact originally intended on the wing. During the life of this Dialogue group prisoners were keenly aware it was happening although only a few found their way into the meeting room itself. It was not obviously appreciated by the staff, many of whom were not that well disposed to treatment for prisoners, but when it was stopped there was a strong call for it to be re-instated. They said that the wing was significantly easier to run and that there was a calmer atmosphere and noticeably less risk of incidents when the Dialogues were running on the wing on a regular basis. The beginnings of the socio-therapeutic influence were therefore evident, and it is not clear how this would have developed had the funding become available for the group to continue.

### **Learning**

The offenders had all been repeatedly interrogated by police, cross-examined by courts, psycho-analysed by psychiatrists, treated by psychologists and most had completed a prison-delivered Sex Offender Treatment Programme before they arrived at the Dialogue Group. They were largely impervious to the typical enquiry approach of 'questions put by the facilitator'. Indeed, they were so skilful they could detail the personal idiosyncrasies of the prison psychiatrist and how to manipulate him. So the Dialogues required the development of a different kind of enquiry – one where the facilitator enquired openly with the offenders, and reflected on his own experiences in life in order to create an atmosphere where others similarly enquired into their

lives. This requires a highly skilled practitioner, beyond those that the prison had access to at that time, and it is obviously not something to be tried by novice facilitators (who are generally advised not to reveal any details whatsoever of their personal lives when working in prisons). With this different approach, however, we did develop a candid and authentic dialogue with real depth. This deeper form of enquiry evolved in this group, and led to the understanding of an approach which is now well understood and developed by PD, and termed 'collective suspension'.

A deep collective enquiry into the roots of violation and violence by those who have an intimate and first-hand knowledge of that journey (in childhood and in adulthood) is a rare, if not unique, Dialogue. It is also proof that people can talk and think constructively about any subject that has affected them very deeply, including rape, paedophilia and murder. Indeed it became evident to those involved in the conversation that without externalising things by talking and thinking about them with others, the source of violation and violence was obscured and continued to drive despicable acts through secrecy. An enquiry into the covert is challenging and requires great skill. It leads to increased transparency, and undertaken in a particular way, the enquirer finds himself standing on a ground of innocence, which can be expanded progressively. This is the therapeutic use of group Dialogue.

The staff were not engaged adequately in the process and it is apparent that a solely prisoner-centric focus cannot harness the full value of Dialogue in a prison. From this point PD's focus shifted for some years to engaging prison and other staff in systemic Dialogue work as well as prisoners to understand how to achieve socio-therapeutic change.