

SORI



Philippa Skinner writes:

SORI: Supporting Offenders through Restoration Inside

On a rather unpromising late January afternoon Graeme and I found ourselves heading to the north of Liverpool and Altcourse Prison. We had been invited by Martin Earl, a member of our church who works there, to attend a meeting.

So it was we began tucking into our sandwiches in the prison car park- creatures of habit, we don't let many things make us forfeit our lunch- waiting for the agreed admission time of 1.15.

Having negotiated the various security checks, we were escorted through several pairs of metres high gates with a group of about 20 others and taken to the chapel which was where the week long

SORI course led by Martin was being held. Here we were put into groups of 3 or 4 and each small group was guided by one of the inmates who had chosen to participate on the very demanding schedule of activities. Our escort, Pete, showed us the work he and the others had been doing as they had been led through a programme designed to help them awaken and face up to the consequences of their crimes on their victims, their families, and wider society.

For me, the afternoon which had begun in a spirit of curiosity and a desire to understand more about what was going on in our prisons took on an unexpectedly personal dimension, as we listened to Pete tell his story and learnt that he was in prison for offences around the illegal supply of drugs. Suddenly here I was, face to face with one of those usually faceless



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people who facilitate the supply of drugs in our society, the easy access to which had ultimately led to the death of our son. It was an emotional moment for me and, I suspect, for him too, as I told him the effect that illegal drugs had had on our family. Because for him too, the victims of his crime are usually faceless. As a parent himself, he could feel our pain and at that point our communication went to a deeper level; human beings caught in the reality that on both sides, supplier and consumer, choices had been made which had led to so much harm which can never be repaired, and we are all living with the consequences.



It was profoundly moving to listen to each of the men- about 10 of them- stand up in front of the whole group, confess their offences and express, often in faltering tones, their growing understanding of the damage they had done, their sense of shame and their desire to live differently on the outside. Without a doubt, it took them all their courage... a different sort of courage to that needed to get by in the macho atmosphere of a prison. One is the courage to pretend, to wear a mask, but this meant having the courage to be stripped bare and exposed- never easy for any of us. I sensed in this important time that

shame had to be part of it all, but that it had a positive purpose, as it was something the men needed to feel in order to choose to be different.

I left the prison with a mixture of feelings. Perhaps the first of these was a kind of trembling for these men. How would they be greeted when they were released? Would they encounter grace and mercy extended by a society that believes in redemption and second or even tenth chances, or would they face a hostile world where they wouldn't be given a fair opportunity to show they want to do things differently now? The second was gratitude for a rare

chance to meet and engage with men who are often thought of as 'them' not 'us'. There are real and complex issues behind all of this, but wherever the barriers fall, we are all human beings and bear the image of God. There has to be room for redemption and new beginnings and we have to have the faith to believe it is possible, even at the risk of being disappointed in some cases. I am glad to have been made aware of Martin's and others' vital work in restorative justice; a real privilege.