

Arba Minch prison, Ethiopia

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Fr Paddy Moran, one of three Irish Spiritan missionaries in the congregation's international community in Ethiopia.

First impressions

Surrounded by four prison officers and having had my mobile phone temporarily confiscated, I did my first tour of the prison overlooking Arba Minch town, some 500 km. south-west of Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa.

The prison, built in the 1960s for some 1,200 prisoners, now has a population of over 2,000, a large percentage of whom are in their early twenties and have not completed primary education.

I visit a male dormitory. There is very little natural light and, with the poor ventilation, I could barely breathe.

This was during the day when it was quiet. At 5pm. the doors are locked and 195 men (some of whom are living with TB) will sleep on sacks of grass and endure those stifling conditions until dawn next morning.

The idea that people could have such poor living conditions here, where I have been based since 2005, was a shock to my system. I thought of W.B. Yeats' *Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold.*

Towards rehabilitation

Yet things could be so different and work is already afoot. Prisoners are allowed to do different income-generating activities. Weavers work in one corner while others are making fishing nets and sewing. There is a health clinic and a barber's shop. Out of nowhere appears an artist at work on a painting. In another section there is a kindergarten and a school. A strange medley of images but most striking of all is the constant buzz of activity.

Social workers engage with the prisoners about ways and means to change their behaviour so as to make better choices when they leave the prison. Recidivism is, impressively, less than 4%. Women train as seamstresses. Men train in wood and metal work. All prisoners can go to the prison school and in 2011 almost 400 were attending.

If the hope of the penal system is rehabilitation then it seems only right that a proper space be created for that to happen - a radical space reminding us of the line in Séamus Heaney's "The Cure at Troy":

*"So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
Is reachable from here".*

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Thinking of crime and punishment

Murder is unique in that it abolishes the party it injures, so that society must take the place of the victim and on their behalf demand atonement or grant forgiveness. - W.H. Auden

I think of the victims, the lives lost, and the families shattered by the untimely death of their loved ones. I think of the families outside the walls whose lives go on with the knowledge that their loved one may never see freedom again. I marvel at the strength, courage, good humour and gentleness of all living a dignified life in such conditions. I pray continually for healing.

Situating all in a Christian context, I see my role as making the prison more conducive to prisoners' growth and healing, and I'm reminded that in scripture the nearest to our Lord in His suffering were prisoners, one of whom He could on his cross console with a promise of freedom. In Matthew 25, visiting the prisoner is as if we are visiting the Lord - an expected criterion of Christian behaviour; not a word about guilt and innocence.

Among women

I was amazed to see children. In the Ethiopian penal system children stay with their mothers until the age of fourteen.

The conditions in the female section were very poor. Gradually, in collaboration with the prison authorities and in particular the Prison Commander, work began on different projects. A pattern emerged quickly that whatever supports the prisoners also supports the life of the prison. Permission was requested and readily granted for a toilet / shower block, and essential ventilation. With malaria prevalent and the women and children sleeping on the floor, I sought permission to provide beds with mattresses, pillows and mosquito nets. It too was granted. Slowly, the face of the female section has been transformed.

Our work so far

So far we have accomplished the following:

- Prison school upgrade: provision of desks, benches and blackboards.
- Installation of a water system to serve the school and a fibreglass tank to increase the availability of water to the male prison.
- Support for income-generating activities for 17 prisoners living with HIV/AIDS.
- Refurbishment and purchase of books for the prison library.
- Construction of the toilet/shower block for female prisoners.
- Provision of bunk beds, mattresses & mosquito nets for all female prisoners and their children and an improved ventilation system in the male and female dormitories.
- The purchase of 15 sheep for a sheep-fattening programme as a revolving fund for male prisoners and 100 chickens for an income-generating project by female prisoners.
- The donation of 5 Singer sewing machines & materials to support the income-generating activities of 5 female prisoners.

Final thoughts and future plans

Recently I visited a very sick prisoner who had been transferred to our local hospital. Painfully thin and in the advanced stages of HIV, he was released into my care so I could drive him and his guard back to the prison. On entering the prison I was conscious of two things. Firstly, it is not right that this man must go straight back into an overcrowded dormitory so it is a priority to build a respite care centre for prisoners returning from hospital. Secondly, I was greatly touched by the way all the prison guards welcomed him back, many embracing him.

For the men, women and children who live there the prison is both home and mother. People have carved their names in its walls, died in its embrace. I think of those realities as we prepare for Christmas.

I hope to be involved in the evolution of the prison in ways that will support all the prisoners. With a great sense of appreciation for all the support for our work so far in the prison, the next phase of work in 2012- funds permitting - envisages:

- ◆ Creation of a multi-purpose hall for computer training, adult literacy and art classes.
- ◆ Construction of a 20-bed, respite care unit for prisoners to recover after hospital treatment.
- ◆ Provision of permanent shelters for weavers on site.
- ◆ Establishment of a shop to be run by a co-operative of 10 female, long-term prisoners.
- ◆ Creation of dining halls in the male and female sections.
- ◆ Construction and equipping of two additional classrooms and a laboratory.

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Where Irish Spiritans are :

Africa: Angola, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Mozambique, Nigeria, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Asia: Pakistan and Vietnam.

Australia: Queensland and Western Australia.

Europe: Ireland & the UK; Brussels and Geneva.

North America: Canada and The USA.

Latin America: Bolivia and Brazil.