

WIDER QUAKER FELLOWSHIP, AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

LETTER 141

MAY 2017

19 Exeter Place, Rotorua 3015, New Zealand.

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Dear Friends,

During the past month I had the privilege of attending the inaugural conference of the International Coalition for the Children of Incarcerated Parents (INCCIP). Some of the sponsorship for this conference had been supplied by Quaker Peace and Service Aotearoa, and I was asked to represent New Zealand Quakers at the four-day meeting.

The conference was all about children who have a parent in prison or in a psychiatric institution. Its message was clear: children and their families/whanau are likely to suffer mental and physical problems when deprived of a parent. Incarceration by the justice system imposes a sentence on the children and also on those left to care for them. The effects of this separation are likely to be long-term and often extend into the wider community.

Pita Sharples, Andrew Becroft, Carolyn Henwood, 15 invited keynote speakers and 36 other presenters from 5 continents were all in agreement that the problem, although so obvious, is not acknowledged by those in authority. Small studies and anecdotal evidence fail to impress to the point where a radical overhaul of the prison system can be contemplated.

Nobody can deny that separation of children from their parents, whatever the circumstances, has effects on the children that only the strongest can overcome. The incarcerated parent can also be affected – restriction of visiting rights removes the ability to take responsibility for family affairs. It also removes opportunities for the expression of love and care.

Corin Morgan-Armstrong presented one of the most telling examples of the effects of a changed attitude to incarcerated parents and their families. At the largest prison in England and Wales (Parc Prison, Bridgend, South Wales), an enlightened Director has allowed Security Staff to organise a venue for family visiting. This has provided a basis for the demonstration of ways in which prisons can deliver low-cost family engagement opportunities. Here statutory services, schools and voluntary agencies are intentionally brought together, and this custody/community partnership has been shown to be a causal factor in the reduction of reoffending and the intergenerational transmission of crime.

Yours in Friendship,

Ruth Gadgil.

Adele Jones (University of Huddersfield, England) talks about "Child Blind Justice". The majority of children affected by the criminal justice system – children of prisoners – simply do not count in the eyes of the law. Worldwide, unprecedented numbers of people are being imprisoned and in many countries including New Zealand, incarceration is on the increase. For children this means that more of them than ever live in families separated because of parental imprisonment; more children than ever have witnessed parental arrest, often in highly distressing circumstances; more children face body searches and rights violations simply executing their right for family contact, or else are denied visiting rights altogether; and

more children than ever have to face the stigma and social and emotional disadvantage of having their mum or dad behind bars. Children of imprisoned parents can be said literally to 'not count' since there is no jurisdiction that effectively identifies the impact on children of parental imprisonment or records the numbers affected. Children of prisoners are now recognised by the UN as one of the world's most vulnerable groups of children.

What do Quakers have to say about separation of children from their parents?

Because of widespread religious persecution in England, especially in the seventeenth century, Quakers have been no strangers to imprisonment. They know about the effects that this can have on families, and particularly on children separated from their parents. Here are some examples of their views, taken from Britain Yearly Meeting *Quaker Faith and Practice 1995*:

For instance, in Bristol in 1672:

On the 7th of the month called July, they dispersed the meeting which then consisted chiefly of children; for the men and women being generally in prison, the children kept up their meetings regularly, and with a remarkable gravity and composure; it was surprising to see the manly courage and constancy with which some of the boys behaved on this occasion, keeping close to meetings in the absence of their parents, and undergoing on that account many abuses with patience ...

19 35.

Consider the wishes and feelings of any children involved, and remember their enduring need for love and security ... If you undergo the distress of separation or divorce, try to maintain some compassionate communication so that arrangements can be made with the minimum of bitterness.

Advices and Queries: 1.02.25.

Imprisonment ... offers some protection to society by removing the offender. But consider how limited that protection is compared to what it could be ... it puts those who need to take control of their lives into a situation where all significant choices are made for them; and it puts the offender who is likely to reform into a milieu where most of the influences on him or her are criminal ones.

John Lampen, 1987: 23.101.

If parents pursue their own interests and vocations (however worthy) without consideration for their families, the children will suffer. There are times when family calls must be put before all others, even those of our Society.

1959: 22.60.

We must all have experienced the circumstances in which a child tries to make himself understood and in which we have prejudged what is his meaning. In that case we never meet. ... We must endeavour to meet each other's minds and we must attempt to achieve not only sympathy but empathy.

D. June Ellis, 1981: 23.76.

Our children are given to us for a time to cherish, to protect, to nurture, and then to salute as they go their separate ways. ... We should trust them enough to be honest with them about family problems.

Elizabeth Watson, 1980: 22.63.

... how vital it is to leave everything to answer a young child's reaching out to you to 'come quickly' to share a sunset or the beauty of a discovered wild flower or the trick of the pet dog, or to listen with full attention, no matter what seems prior on your agenda, when children burst into the house ... eager to have you listen to a tale of woe or a triumph they have experienced during the day.

Dorothy Steere, 1984: 22.62.

Entrusted with the care of children not born to you gives a heightened sense of responsibility and the feeling that you must 'get it right', while always being more conscious of the approval of others. *Juliet Batten, 1994. 22.64.*

Difficult and painful divorces; an alcoholic parent; the death of a small child or of a parent – how do children cope with these situations? Adults who find them difficult believe that children need to be protected from them. Are children indeed more robust than we think? Perhaps children are enabled to cope when they see that adults are coping. ... The family is a system in which each member needs to be allowed to assert her or his needs and have them met in the loving interaction of family life. *Douglas and Jenny Butterfield, 1986:22.65*

My time with my foster parents provided me with a crucial stability and predictability into which each of my parents descended periodically to take me out or to take me on holiday. I was very confused as to who were my real parents, at one point being convinced that my foster family were, and these visitors were imposters. I cannot look back on that time as happy. I increasingly recognise and remember that I was a very unhappy child full of powerful feelings of needs which I felt I could not express for fear of losing what security I did have.

Caroline Jones, 1994. 22.67.

Our Quaker witness demands of us that [in the words of Pierre Ceresole] we "respect children very much more than they respect themselves". *Barbara Windle, 1988:23.78.*

Weekends at the Quaker Settlement, 76 Virginia Road, Whanganui 4500

2-5 June - Queen's Birthday Work and Fun

Our annual weekend with a wonderful tradition of working together: see and help with developments in the North Valley and the Food Forest. Again, great food and free accommodation.

Contact: Nigel Brooke - nigel.mandy@clear.net.nz

14-16 July - Whanganui River, Te Awa Tupua, a New Story for Our Time

The Whanganui River Te Awa Tupua Treaty Settlement is a revolutionary piece of law: the Awa has its own legal status and decision making is guided by consensus and dialogue. We will explore how this law will enrich our relationships between iwi, communities and nature.

Facilitators: Murray Short, Peter Horsley.

Contact: Marion Sanson - marionbsanson@gmail.com

28-30 July - The radical heart of Quakers

Rediscover Quakerism by exploring the birthplace of the movement and its earliest, major figures. This course is an experiment! Includes internet interaction with Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre tutors and reflection time on how this history enriches us today.

Facilitators: Michael Searle, Ronis Chapman and Woodbrooke Tutors.

Contact: Anne Hall - ahall@inspire.net.nz

18-20 August - Principled Nonviolence in Theory and Practice

This workshop will help activists and others analyse injustice and unpeacefulness. Participants will learn to design and deliver effective non violent actions for sociopolitical change.

Facilitators: Kevin Clements, Danny Fridberg, Rachel Rafferty (National Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Otago).

Contact: Peter Watson - earlyearstoys@gmail.com

The Wider Quaker Fellowship is an association of persons of diverse backgrounds who wish to have ties with the Religious Society of Friends without necessarily being in its membership, or who, through isolation, illness or some other circumstance are unable to attend a Monthly Meeting.

Any person who finds the fundamental Quaker testimonies and the Quaker way of life, with its emphasis on sincerity and simplicity, compatible with his or her philosophy of life is welcome to join the Fellowship. A request to the Clerk will ensure enrolment as a member.