

the promise

News about our Covenant With the Poor



I WAS IN PRISON AND
YOU CAME TO SEE ME

Prisoners in this country are out of sight, and so out of mind - how much more so for those in many foreign prisons, where the harsh and overcrowded conditions are hard to imagine. So our Advent appeal this year is for *The Jesuit Foundation Prison Ministry*, in Thailand.


The ministry is run by just six people, who between them visit 1,900 inmates, men and women of 43 nationalities, in seven prisons and three prison hospitals, within a 200 mile radius of Bangkok - including a Young Offenders Prison.

The visitors spend 80% of their time going to see the prisoners and talking to them and listening to their stories. For many of the prisoners these visits are their only contact with the outside world. The visitors also provide them with a few basic items such as soap, toothpaste and toothbrushes, washing powder, blankets, pen and paper. They also arrange health support, such as dentistry and glasses.

And at Christmas they try to give them a few extras, like clothing and towels, or footballs and other sports equipment.

The visitors also act as advocates for prisoners, helping them to find lawyers, and arranging royal pardons or prisoner exchanges. They may write letters for them, and contact their families. They also help to prepare them for release, and when they are released they give them the basic fare they need to return home.

The prison regimes vary, and keeping track of the prisoners is difficult and time consuming. Some prisons allow one visit a month, others less frequent; and



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No. 22 Advent 2010

“In so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.”

These words, intended to shock, are an unambiguous call to action - we cannot ignore them.

It is with these Poor - the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the sick, those lacking clothes, or in prison - that each year we renew our Covenant.

In this issue you will read about our new appeal for the Jesuit Prison Ministry in Thailand. There are also updates on the SWVG's work with the strangers - asylum seekers - in our midst, and SUDA's and Potter's House provision of vital healthcare.

We are fortunate to have had so many excellent projects to support over the years, but there is always room for new ideas.

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So we are making an *Appeal for Appeals*. If you know of a project that you feel the parish could consider supporting through the Covenant with the Poor (CWP), or just have an idea of a type of project, or a place, or a form of poverty that is below our radar, come and tell us about it. All the projects that the CWP has supported over the years have been suggested by people in the parish. So come and have your say too.

The CWP Group is just an informal gathering of interested parishioners. Our meetings, to which all are welcome, are advertised in the parish newsletter. At them we make suggestions, hear proposals, discuss projects and choose those for which future appeals will be made. There is no membership and you can get involved to whatever level you like. (There is also coffee and biscuits - thank you St. Gregory's.)

some allow only telephone contact. Others do not permit even basic items to be given without special permission, which can take many months to arrange. Many of the prisoners are foreign, so between them the visitors speak Thai, French, English, Burmese, Vietnamese, Lao and Chinese.

The Jesuits Foundation has found fundraising for prisoners difficult at the best of times, as few individuals appear to be willing to contribute to this work. Most of their funds, therefore, come from Jesuit missions and other religious agencies. In recent years fundraising has got even harder, so that the ministry has had to stop their supply of vitamins to prisoners, and they presently have no funds for the small gifts they give at Christmas.

So we have been asked if we can raise money for much needed healthcare for the prisoners, and for

released prisoner assistance:

- £2 will give a prisoner a set of glasses,
- £5 will pay for a tooth extraction,
- £8 buys one dental cleaning,
- £8-16 will pay for a tooth filling.

The average cost of providing the most basic healthcare for the 1900 prisoners the ministry visits is just £2 (£3,800). With assistance of £30 for each of 50 released prisoners (£1,500), this gives a target for our appeal of **£5,300**.

This ministry - for murderers, thieves, drug traffickers and rapists - is neither an easy nor a sympathetic choice. But the dedication of these few hard working people gives dignity to those that society has rejected, and makes us all one in God's love. *Thank you.*

Overcrowding in a Thai prison



For more information on the Prison Ministry, please visit the Jesuits in Asia Pacific website at sjapc.net/content/committing-prison-ministry

I WAS A STRANGER AND YOU MADE ME WELCOME

A PROJECT UPDATE FROM SWVG

We, the Southampton and Winchester Visitors' Group, are so enormously grateful on our clients' behalf for the wonderfully generous donation of over £9,000, made possible by the response of you all to the appeal for the Covenant With the Poor. This donation is enabling us this winter to pay for a room and food for ten weeks for ten vulnerable asylum seekers, and to provide money for food for ten more. Winter is of course a particularly difficult time for people who without our support would almost certainly find themselves living on the streets and exposed to further abuse and danger.

As a group we provide practical, emotional and financial support for some of the most vulnerable, misunderstood and marginalised people in our society. Our clients are asylum seekers in Southampton, many of whom have had their initial asylum claim refused and been made destitute as a result of government policy. Their minimal state support has been withdrawn and they are forbidden to work. These men and women, who have fled persecution and sometimes torture in their own country for political or religious reasons, find themselves adrift, friendless and lacking even basic food and shelter in a strange country with whose customs, language and bureaucracy they are often quite unfamiliar. We are able to provide support and friendship, and can put them in touch with doctors and solicitors who can often help them gather fresh evidence to reopen their cases. Progress is painfully slow and many of our clients have waited many years to learn the outcome of their asylum claim.

To some, our ASSIST scheme offers a small basic room and £20 a week for food and other

necessities. To others, we can offer only minimal financial support. This scheme is currently costing us around £70,000 a year and, although we try very hard never to refuse anyone in real distress, each month we have hard decisions to make, and funds are always short to meet the needs of all who approach us.

In the last few months we have been extremely heartened that several of our very long standing clients have finally, after many frustrations and disappointments, been granted *Indefinite Leave to Remain*. The picture shows two of these, a young man and woman, from Eritrea, who met in this country and both of whom have been supported at different times by our ASSIST scheme. Having waited in limbo over seven years they have at last got *Indefinite Leave to Remain* and can begin to make plans for finding work, making a home and starting a real family life together here. We very much hope that at least some of those whom your generosity is helping this winter can also look forward to a brighter future as respected members of a society to which they make a full contribution.

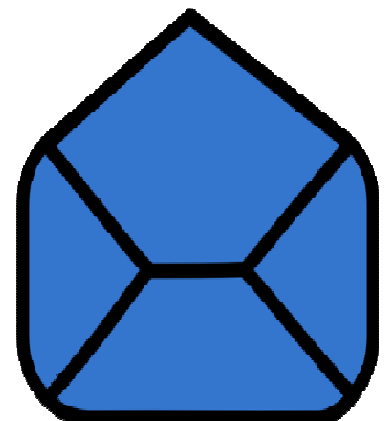


SWVG are always looking for helpers in their valuable work. If you would like to know more, phone them on 07503 176350, or email them at admin@swvg-refugees.org.uk

GIFT AID

Please remember, if you are a tax payer, we can reclaim the tax you paid on your CWP donation, so significantly adding to the total sum raised for our projects. But only if you fill in one of the blue CWP Gift Aid envelopes.

You will find these at the back of the church during the appeals, and the bucket holders will have some. Don't worry if you don't have time to fill it in right away - take one with you and do so at your leisure. Once your donation is in the envelope it can be put in any Mass collection and it will find its way to us.



I WAS SICK AND YOU VISITED ME

PROJECT UPDATES FROM SUDA AND POTTER'S HOUSE

Kitty Todd, Secretary of SUDA writes: 'Kalalasi and the surrounding villages are feeling the benefits of the new Health Centre, and the hospitals in Sumbawanga and Matai are relieved that some of the pressure is taken off them. The district authorities are making room for a laboratory, so the equipment we purchased with money from your Gift Aid can be fully utilized. A new doctor has been appointed to work there.'



Vaccinations at the Health Centre

'Mhairi Duncan, a medical student from Cambridge contacted us as she was keen to spend part of her elective in the Sumbawanga region. Mbeka organised help with her journey, a family to stay with in Kalalasi, and provided some background knowledge. Mhairi was particularly impressed by the work with mothers and babies. But one thing that did concern her was the shortage of drinking water. The water harvesting tanks were insufficient for the number of people using the Health Centre, especially as they developed leaks and will need mending before the next rainy season. However, the Tanzanian Government now has a scheme where they pay 90% of the cost of putting in deep boreholes and pumps in villages that can come up with the remaining 10%. We hope to raise the necessary £4,000 for this.'

'Thank you very much for your support, **Kitty.**' For more information go to: www.sumbawanga.org.uk

In January, the CWP was able to send an additional £3,000 to Potter's House in Guatemala in support of their Health Program. Potter's House open their medical clinic three days a week, and on Fridays within the Guatemala City dump itself.



The Potter's House pharmacy...

Edgar and Gladys from Potter's House write: 'In times of physical need the children living on the dump outside Guatemala City turn to the public health system for help, but many times they are given prescriptions for medications that are way beyond their financial means. Many of them come to Potter's House looking for help to purchase those medications, and find that they can buy them at our pharmacy for a token price.'

'Guatemala has the highest infant mortality rate in all of Central America and the public health system in Guatemala is completely inefficient - 49% of school age children suffer from malnutrition and sickness. Medical consultations, laboratory examinations and medication are out of the question for the scavengers on the dump.'

'Potter's House was so blessed to have received this special donation from the Parish of Hampshire Downs that is allowing us to provide these patients, and the ones referred from our own clinic, the opportunity to purchase their medicines.'



... and clinic

For more information go to: www.pottershouse.org.gt