

# A Year in Irish Prisons: Chaplains' Annual Reports

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## INTRODUCTION

It is often remarked that prisons are a reflection of society. Upon reading the annual reports produced by Chaplains in Irish prisons, an alternative view emerges of prisons being more a reflection of certain sectors of society. Parts which are often marked by unemployment, addiction, and poverty. In the stark description of prisons by one Chaplain, they are described as a “dumping ground” for a range of societal issues and, in particular, people with severe and enduring mental ill-health. However, imprisonment, as a last resort, is the appropriate sanction for a range of serious offences and serves an important function within the criminal justice system.

In Ireland, the provision of community sanctions for less serious offences and offending related to mental ill-health and addiction can offer alternatives to imprisonment where a short prison sentence would otherwise be imposed. At an average annual cost of €80,445 in 2020 for a staffed prison place, the cost of imprisonment to the State is considerable. While statistics can demonstrate the monetary cost of imprisonment, it is difficult to overlook the wasteland of human tragedy; both for those in custody and their victims and families, which is not as easily measured. Chaplains’ annual reports reflect this trauma-laden landscape and provide insights into the trauma-informed approach of chaplains in an environment which is emotionally demanding. The Irish Prison Service has an inordinate challenge in responding to this complex terrain in a manner so that recidivism is reduced and our communities are safer.

The popular narratives of prison chaplaincy as one-dimensional or as a charitable venture lack depth and misrepresent the reality of prison chaplains, who are highly skilled professionals making an impact at an individual, prison, organisational, and societal level through their expertise and practice. The diverse range of Chaplains’ experiences in Irish prisons reflect the reality of the work of Prison Chaplains as they respond to, highlight, and address issues in our prison system in a thoughtful and thought-provoking manner. The skilled nature of the work of Prison Chaplains is evidenced in how they retain the confidence of both the prisoners and staff.



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## IRISH PRISON SERVICE ESTATE

There are 12 prisons in the Irish prison estate, including two open centres, nine medium-security prisons, and one high-security prison. There are approximately 4,110 people in custody and approximately 3,455 staff<sup>1</sup>. Prison Chaplains are employees of the Irish Prison Service and operate as an essential function supported by the Department known as the Care and Rehabilitation Directorate. Each prison and open centre has a Chaplain or a team of Chaplains depending on the location. There are 25 Prison Chaplains employed by the Irish Prison Service, 18 of whom are full-time equivalents and seven of whom are part-time. In recent recruitment competitions, the essential criteria were a recognised professional qualification in theology or pastoral care and a minimum of one year’s pastoral experience in a community, school or hospital setting or a prison or other similar secure setting. Prison chaplaincy is a key component within the Irish Prison Service and has a fundamental role in the delivery of support to those who live and work in prisons and to community stakeholders including families of those in custody.

## THE PRISON RULES 2007 AND PRISON CHAPLAINCY

While a review of the history of prison chaplaincy in Ireland is beyond the scope of this essay, its origins can be traced back to the Gaol Chaplains Act 1773. Its establishment was inextricably linked to the reform measures of that time, especially those measures relating to prison conditions and regime development. The alleviation of the distress of prisoners as a primary function of prison chaplaincy set out in the 1773 Act provided a clear purpose for chaplaincy, both then and now.

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<sup>1</sup> Figures accurate as of June 2022.

The place of the Prison Chaplain has been sustained into modern times and has evolved into the prison chaplaincy of today as both the social and political reality of Ireland has developed. More than two hundred years after the 1773 Act, the Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Penal System in 1985, known as the Whitaker Report, recognised the contribution of prison chaplaincy across the different strands of prison life including the provision of comfort and support; the encouragement of human growth, development and reconciliation; and described the Prison Chaplain as an “informal ombudsman” raising the voice of the prisoner and making representations on their behalf to prison authorities.<sup>2</sup>

The Prison Rules 2007 provides the statutory basis for prison chaplaincy in Ireland which reflects both European and international standards. While reference to Chaplains occurs throughout the Prison Rules 2007, reflecting the wide reach of chaplaincy in prisons, the main sections relating to chaplaincy are Rule 34 concerning the “religious, spiritual and moral life of prisoners” and Rules 114-119 identifying the duties of Chaplains.<sup>3</sup>

It is of note that, under the Prison Rules 2007, the Prison Chaplain is provided with unique access, unaccompanied, to all parts of the prison at any time (Rule 117). In addition, a prisoner may meet with the Prison Chaplain out of the presence, view, and hearing of a prisoner officer, subject to local orders and with the agreement of both Chaplain and prisoner (Rule 34 (9)). Such a privileged position provides a unique insight into Irish prisons which is then given voice through the reporting duties of Chaplains provided for under the Prison Rules 2007.

## A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A PRISON CHAPLAIN

Chaplains advocate for the dignity of every human being, with a particular attentiveness to the prisoner. Examples of advocacy include a Chaplain’s participation in the multi-disciplinary forum, submission of annual reports, liaising

with support services, and engaging with key stakeholders including families of prisoners.

Prison chaplaincy’s remit is for the entire prison community and especially for prisoners and their families. The unique position of Prison Chaplains within the system is sometimes described as “neutral” or “independent” distinguishing chaplaincy from other roles, for example prison officers who need to be more concerned with discipline and security. This facilitates the role of chaplaincy in being accessible for and available to both prisoners and staff in the navigation of prison life. The distinctive role of chaplaincy also complements the roles played by other staff as chaplaincy does not operate in a vacuum but rather is part of the texture of prison life.

The Chaplain meets prisoners on their first day in prison or as soon as possible after committal and accompanies prisoners throughout their time in custody. For a prisoner who is in prison for the first time, the Chaplain provides support in the adaptation and adjustments needed for the prison environment. Though encouraging all prisoners to work towards positive life-style changes, Chaplains can help to motivate them to address offending behaviour and to engage with prison services. On a day-to-day basis, Chaplains visit prisoners in all parts of the prison or open centre and accompany prisoners throughout the custodial journey. In so doing, they often develop a rehabilitative relationship with prisoners and their families that offers encouragement and support so that reoffending is reduced and safer communities are created. Annual reports also highlight the challenges in delivering chaplaincy services with a limited number of Chaplains in post and explain the potential rehabilitative benefits which could be realised with additional provision of Chaplains. As such, Chaplains offer a unique insight into the prison at a given point in time.

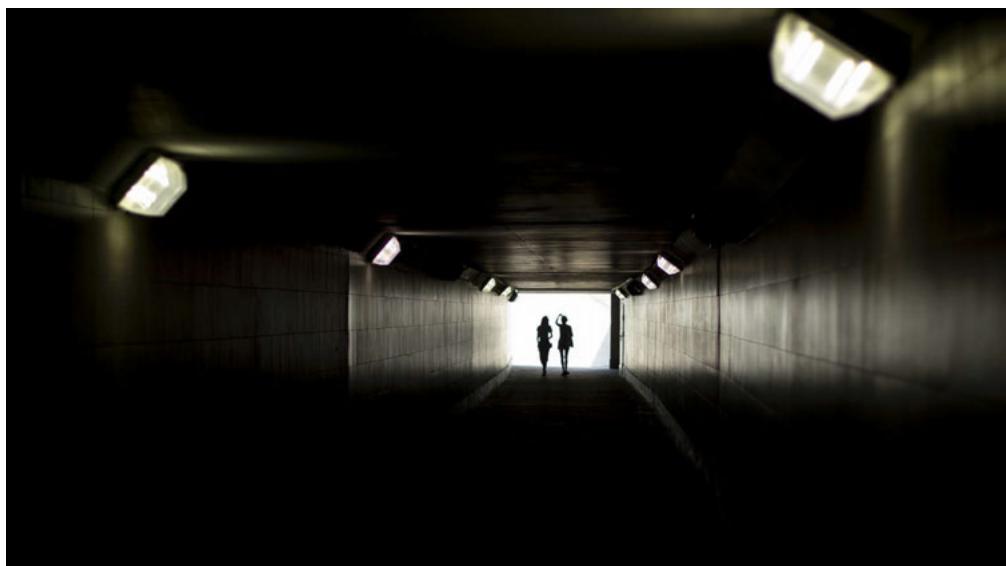
Prison Chaplains spend time with people at times of bereavement and loss and liaise with families through phone calls, meetings, support

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<sup>2</sup> Whitaker Report (Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Penal System), (Dublin: Government Publications, 1985), pp 100.

<sup>3</sup> Prison Rules (SI 252/2007). Available at: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2007/si/252/made/en/print>



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To lose a loved one while imprisoned is  
doubly so.

groups, and visits outside of the prison including to hospitals. Prison Chaplains accompany and support prisoners through many personal challenges within the prison environment, and also intervene and are present during times of crisis which include when a person dies in prison or hospital while in the custody of the Irish Prison Service. To lose a loved one is always a trauma. To lose a loved one while imprisoned is doubly so. Whenever that happens, the Chaplain is there to break the news, console the person grieving, and to stay with them as they adapt to their changed world.

Prison Chaplains work as part of the prison multi-disciplinary team reporting to the Governor. They are at the frontline of developing appropriately pluralistic responses in modern Ireland – Chaplains are respectful of and seek to meet the needs of prisoners from all belief systems and also people of all faiths and none. Chaplains play a coordinating role in relation to the provision of religious services and liaise with multi-faith and inter-religious community-based leaders. Chaplains, at the request of individual prisoners, arrange for the

attendance of spiritual advisors with a range of backgrounds to attend prisons on a visiting basis subject to normal visit rules. In doing so, Chaplains establish and maintain sound working relations with local churches, religious denominations and community-based faith organisations.

The designation by the Irish Prison Service of Prison Chaplains as frontline staff required the physical attendance of Chaplains in prisons throughout the pandemic. This was during a time when the transmission of the virus was a dominant worry and concern. It is a real testament to Chaplains that in spite of the pandemic and even though very little was known about Covid-19, Chaplains continued to provide services at personal and individual risk by being physically present in prisons.

## REPORTING DUTY OF THE PRISON CHAPLAIN

Prison Chaplains hold a reporting duty. This is classified in Prison Rules 2007 under both Rules 118 and 119. This two-fold reporting structure has the benefit of addressing immediate issues through Rule 118 and then addressing issues through a broader view of the year through the Annual Report under Rule 119.

Under Rule 118 the Prison Chaplain, upon forming “the opinion that the spiritual, moral, mental, emotional or physical state of any

prisoner is being significantly impaired by his or her imprisonment”, is required to inform the Governor in writing. This Rule provides an authority to the Chaplain to raise serious concerns without delay to the Governor, so that prompt action may be taken to address and resolve the matters raised by the Prison Chaplain.

Under Rule 119 the Prison Chaplain is required each year to prepare and submit an annual report “to the Director General and to the Governor... on matters relevant to the provision of chaplaincy services in the prison”, thus providing an overall view of the year in question. Annual reports reflect the benefits of chaplaincy to prisoners in particular, and also to staff and other stakeholders in the community and address areas of concern while also identifying structural barriers to the provision of chaplaincy.

Reflecting the interest in these reports, not only within the Irish Prison Service, but also in the public domain, the Irish Prison Service reintroduced the practice of publishing chaplaincy annual reports in 2019, making the reports freely available to the public on the website of the Irish Prison Service.<sup>4</sup>

## PRISON CHAPLAINCY ANNUAL REPORTS

Explaining the important contribution of chaplaincy to the prison community throughout the year in question and to stakeholders in the community, the annual reports offer unique insights from the perspective of daily interactions with those who live and work in prisons and their families in the community. The determined efforts and commitment of Prison Chaplains in the difficult working environment of prisons is clearly evident. While the support of the Irish Prison Service for chaplaincy is regularly acknowledged, the annual reports also highlight shortcomings within the prison system and the wider criminal justice system.

While annual reports differ depending on issues local to that prison, recurring themes include matters pertaining to prisoner care and issues of a systemic nature. Some of these issues relate

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to overcrowding, life-sentence management, elderly prisoners, waiting lists for services, and sentencing and community alternatives. The support of management and prison staff towards chaplaincy services is often reported.

Chaplaincy is also a prophetic voice. The description of Chaplains as “the voice of the prisoner” may well be supplemented with the description of the “the canary in the coalmine”. This is because reports have a track record of identifying issues far in advance of these issues becoming the subject of popular debate. An example from the recent past is in relation to St. Patricks Institution as Chaplains, over many years, highlighted serious concerns in their report relating to the imprisonment of children and their treatment. The pinnacle of the prophetic voice of Chaplains in this area culminated in the annual report of 2010 on foot of which a Government undertaking was made in relation to St. Patricks Institution leading to its eventual closure in 2017.

Another area highlighted consistently is the severe and enduring mental ill-health of prisoners and addiction challenges, which Prison Chaplains were raising over 30 years ago, and it continues to be an area which Chaplains must consistently advocate on. As in the community, the impact of Covid-19 through restrictions, isolation, reduced contact with family and loved ones, lack of control, bereavement, and concerns about health, has introduced an additional layer of concern in the area of mental health in prisons. It is of interest to observe current developments in addressing mental ill-health in prisons by the Department of Justice, the Irish Prison Service, the Department of Health and other actors from across the Justice and Health sectors. Through the creation of a High Level Taskforce, decision-makers and stakeholders have been brought together to consider the mental ill-health and addiction challenges of persons interacting with the criminal justice system.

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<sup>4</sup> Chaplains Reports, *Irish Prison Service*, <https://www.irishprisons.ie/information-centre/publications/chaplains-reports/>

The impact of Covid-19 is reflected throughout recent annual reports which refer to the effects that Covid-19 has had on the prison community; acknowledging what has worked well and also noting the human cost associated with Covid-19 restrictions. Significant and continued efforts were made by the Irish Prison Service to ensure the safety of prisoners and staff, including the management and mitigation by the Irish Prison Service against the risk of transmission of Covid-19 since the start of the pandemic. The swift adaptation of chaplaincy and the prioritisation of the safety of everyone, ensured that chaplaincy continued to be provided in a safe manner. One noteworthy chaplaincy innovation has been the development of TeleChaplaincy which is a telephone service providing remote pastoral care to prisoners confined due to COVID-19 whether in isolation, in quarantine, or cocooning.<sup>5</sup> This innovative service overcomes the restrictions of physical distancing and supports the safety and well-being of prisoners confined due to Covid facilitating a confidential phone call between prisoner and Chaplain thus ensuring that pastoral care for prisoners confined due to Covid has continued to be available during the pandemic.

Throughout the pandemic, the Irish Prison Service continued to manage the risks and challenges posed by Covid-19 in line with public health guidelines and in accordance with the Government *Framework for Living with Covid-19*. A wide range of measures were introduced during the pandemic. The introduction of necessary infection control measures resulted in restrictions in the operation of the normal prison regime. This impacted service provisions in a number of areas. While other sectors and services were paused or suspended, Chaplains continued to provide pastoral support to the prison community throughout the pandemic by continuing to be physically present across the prison estate. The increase in demand for chaplaincy was sustained throughout the pandemic with the role of chaplaincy key to many areas of prison life. In addition to this, chaplaincy was also called on to assist in areas

which ordinarily would be provided for by other sectors and services which were paused or suspended.

## CONCLUSION: A SERVICE IN NEED OF STRENGTHENING

The pandemic made it necessary for chaplaincy to innovate quickly, which was positive and achieved in such extraordinary circumstances. The Irish Prison Service was proactive in contingency planning for chaplaincy and the approval of resources in response to the pandemic. However, the pandemic has highlighted general risks for persons in prison and also risks specific to chaplaincy provision in Irish prisons. One of the risks includes, but is not limited to, the provision of adequate numbers of Chaplains for each prison location. A seven-day chaplaincy provision is the expectation and need of stakeholders. Chaplains are required for after-hours emergencies, primarily deaths in custody. This is a sizeable task with the current modest allocation of Prison Chaplains. At present, it functions because of their commitment to their work, but it is a situation which is not sustainable into the future.

Prior to the pandemic, chaplaincy was already facing significant challenges in the area of the provision of adequate numbers of Chaplains. The pandemic has intensified this and Covid-19 has resulted in this risk becoming critical. The approval by the Irish Prison Service for an independent external review of chaplaincy in Irish prisons—to address and support the provision of chaplaincy across the prison estate—is a welcomed development, and one which will shape the future development of prison chaplaincy in Ireland and enhance the rehabilitative contribution of prison chaplaincy. The long-term effect of the impact of Covid-19 on prisons will likely be subject to careful analysis in the future and the perspective of chaplaincy as detailed in the annual reports for this period will be an important record and source of information.

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<sup>5</sup> Kevin Hargaden, "Prison Chaplaincy in the Age of Covid-19," *Theology* 123, no. 5 (September 1, 2020): 337–45, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X20944578>