

montenegro engels (C: lezingen)

Text lecture rev. J.D.W. Eerbeek, former General Chaplain of the protestant prison chaplaincy in The Netherlands and former chairman of Exodus Nederland, at the conference of The Christian Movement of Montenegro on december 12, 2013

It is with great pleasure that I will speak to you about the coming home of ex-prisoners in society.

I will tell you about the development of a Dutch organisation, Exodus. There was nothing. From point zero it grew to a big well known national organization.

A short introduction

At first, briefly something about myself. My name is Jan Eerbeek and I am retired since last June. I worked 20 years as a prisonchaplain in The Hague in the Netherlands (1979 – 1998).

This prison was the strongest high security prison. Also it had prisoners with problematic behaviour.

After that I became General Chaplain at the Ministry of Justice and I gave guidance to 60 prison chaplains.

Prison chaplaincy and belief in God

In the Netherlands prison chaplains are civil servants. They are government employees, but their mission is directed by their churches. So they are both civil servants and church officials.

In Holland seven religions and the state work together, so that every prisoner can confess his own religion or philosophy.

The Christian belief can give an important contribution to come to a new life without crime.

It is my experience that many prisoners are looking for God. That is because of the situation when you are alone with yourself and you see the ruins of your life.

Then you see what is really worthy and what not.

In the Christian belief our identity is that we are a child of God. That is our human dignity. Living according to that dignity gives meaning to our existence. So belief in God awakens motivation for a new life.

In Dutch prisons the chaplain works together with volunteers. These volunteers make visible that there is a community from outside, where you keep belonging to, also when you are in prison. The volunteers form a connection with outside and they give the prisoner a feeling of belonging to society. That feeling of belonging to society is essential to leave the world of crime and come home in society.

The start of the aftercare programme

In 1981 I started together with volunteers the programme of Exodus. We noticed prison chaplains played an important role. But after detention many former prisoners are alone, without any form of assistance. It is a time when they need strong guidance. The Exodus work started in a large basement under a block of flats. Here an Open Home was created, which welcomed former prisoners. The prisoners found there volunteers and chaplains they had met in prison.

The idea was to create a happy atmosphere, a home to its visitors.

It was a place to relax, to be creative, to talk together and to share a hot meal.

There was no money for the organization. It was point zero. We had only a strong belief that ex-prisoners need a new beginning, a new start. So Exodus was an ideal to realize, to go for, to work for.

When the churches and members of the churches saw our idealism, they began to support. And that support grew till today.

The Open Home worked for a small group only. Many former prisoners needed more intensive guidance.

A study was therefore started into the possibilities of opening a residential house for living under guidance.

An official Exodus Foundation was set up. It had the following two targets:

First: give assistance in a personal programme.

Secondly: creating possibilities in society as a whole.

The name 'Exodus' is a biblical image that stands for 'leaving behind an unwanted existence and building up a new life'. So Exodus has its roots in the church community, but this doesn't mean that it would attempt to convert people.

From the point of view of the churches, Exodus is a project of Christian service, Christian presence, not of conversion. It is open to all religions and views of life.

The development of Exodus

In 1986 the first Exodus Home, with a residential re-integration programme, opened its doors.

The home also had a bicycle repair shop, combining living and working under guidance in one single organisation.

Now in 2013 Exodus grew up to a big national organisation with 11 houses all over the country. Every year there live 450 ex-prisoners.

There is professional guidance for 24 hours a day.

And there are in total 220 professional workers. There are also volunteers working in the houses. They do all kind of complementary tasks.

Most of the residents of the houses still have the status of 'prisoner'. They are still in their detention time, but they got the opportunity to leave prison. The Ministry of Justice pays for their participation in the Exodusprogramme.

The main part of the budget of Exodus comes from the ministry of Justice and local government. Also many private investors and churches pay for Exodus.

Universities did research the results. The results are very good.

When you look at all the residents, there is 10 percent less recidivism. This includes also the residents who don't finish the programme. When you look at the residents who succeeded to finish the programme, there is 30 percent less recidivism.

Besides the Exodus houses, Exodus has 1800 volunteers, assisting in pastoral care.

It is nice to say here that the political party SGP in The Netherlands is a strong supporter of the aftercare projects. Thanks to support of the SGP much money from the government comes to aftercare.

The guidance philosophy

Now I will give you six points about the guidance philosophy of Exodus.

1. The guidance philosophy of Exodus is focused on the complex personal and social problems of many ex-prisoners.

There are personal problems and there are society-based problems. Many prisoners have both personal and social problems.

In the personal area, there are problems such as

- retarded personal development
- retarded relational and social skills and education
- the inability to manage a household
- instability in day-to-day activities
- addiction problems
- problems connected with the own religious-cultural background
- problems with motivation and having a goal in life
- a lack of long-term significant contacts
- loneliness.

The social problems are:

- having no job, no home,
- the social environment
- not enough supporting contacts
- the criminal record.

Also 'not having a bond' with society is playing an important role in crime.

Having a bond – with your fellow men, your loved one or your parents, but also with institutions like school, work, or the sports club – is a key factor in integration. After all, if there is no bond, you are unaffected by society. You have nothing to lose, you don't care. Due to these complex background problems and the lack of a bond with society, many prisoners find themselves caught in a vicious circle out of which they cannot escape without help.

2. Integral guidance programme: living, working, relationships, belief and giving meaning to life

Exodus's guidance philosophy is that these complex problems can only be tackled in a broadly-based and coherent guidance programme, including all aspects of life. We call them the four keys: living, working, establishing relationships and giving meaning to life. The relation between these different aspects is essential.

Giving meaning to life

A specific part in the comprehensive guidance of Exodus is attention for immaterial meaning in a person's life.

Man's life unfolds from within. Organising the future starts deep in the inner room of the prisoner himself.

Not in the room of the professional.

The choices a person makes, the values and standard he observes, the responsibility he takes – these are all based in his religious background or his philosophy of life. If life cannot be regarded in a broader, meaningful existence, then there is no anchor for the existence. It means that people may drown in the waves of life that wash over him.

3. Who qualify for the project? (intake criteria)

Everybody between the age of eighteen and sixty-five with concrete learning issues that relate to their return to society qualify for Exodus.

Essential is the motivation to start a new life. They must be able to cooperate in the guidance. Contra-indications are recent or long-term hard drug abuse, mental disorders, inability to make bonds and lack of motivation.

4 . The guidance structure

The highly-structured and round-the-clock guidance is given by professional staff. Each resident has a personal counsellor. The programme is divided into periods.

There are three periods: orientation, development and independence.

The first two weeks of the orientation period is dedicated to a wide range of basic activities, such as going to social security or job centre. During this time he makes his room his home.

During the orientation period of two months the counsellor and the resident write a personal guidance plan. In the development period this plan is leading.

After this period comes the independence period.

The guidance programme offers a wide range of guidance points. I mention 15 points.

- budgeting
- social skills
- re-establishment of family relations
- meeting appointments and doing what you promise
- relationships in general
- anger management
- daily routines
- sports and recreation
- dealing with other residents and the local community
- functioning on the work floor
- solving problems of debts
- finding living quarters
- identifying and avoiding potential crime risks
- looking for new contacts
- and giving meaning to life.

An important point in the programme is providing a tight guidance structure.

All residents must observe the clear house-rules and rules of conduct. There is a total ban on soft and hard drugs as well as alcohol.

If a resident fails to observe any of the house-rules, rules of conduct or any agreement made, he is given a yellow card. Ten yellow cards means a red card. This means that he must leave the home.

There are also green cards, given when the behaviour is good for a longer time.

5. A new social existence: concrete guidance results

The guidance programme must offer concrete results.

When the residents leave the home, they will have accomodation, work and a fresh start with new relationships. They have a solid basis on which they can build their future. They have created a bond with society.

In order to realize concrete results in the guidance, Exodus has constructed a broad network of churches, probation service, employer organisations, housing cooperations, foundations and funds, combining target 1 of Exodus (personal guidance) with target 2 (creating social opportunities).

6. Professional guidance embedded in society: re-integration by society itself.

In the development of Exodus, the vision grew that the professional guidance must be rooted in society itself, especially in private organisations. After all, re-integration is not just about the former prisoner, but also about society itself. Future for prisoners needs anchor-points in communities in society.

Advises for the start of aftercare in Montenegro

1. Make an organisation that carries the development of resocialisation and aftercare. Create a broad support in churches, funds, private investors, employers, social assistance. Create connection with the government.
2. Create a integral guidanceprogramme that is in sharp connection with the complex problems.
3. Make ex-prisoners visible. Also make concrete guidance results visible. Make clear that resocialisation is the best contribution in the struggle against recidivism and crime.
4. Look at the experiences in other countries to prevent mistakes of beginners.
5. Make connections inside and outside prisons. For instance a connection between pastoral care in detention and aftercare.

Ladies en gentlemen,

Some time ago I met a young woman, named Sonja, in The Hague. She is married to one of the very first residents of the Exodushome in The Hague, called Mike. Mike came to Exodus because he wanted to look after his son, named Ricardo. Ricardo's mother, whom he had divorced, had died from a drug overdose. Mike was also on drugs and he was deeply involved in crime. The future of his child made it necessary to think about his own future.

He chose to leave behind crime and his addiction, and he came in Exodus. Sonja was a volunteer there. After some time they started a relationship and together they took care of the young Ricardo. Later on they also had a child together.

When I met Sonja, it had been almost 15 years since we had first met.

I asked how things were. 'We are doing well', she said, 'and so are the children. Mike is still working as a truck driver.'

I thought about the things we went through when we guided Mike. His guidance route was also one of ups-and-downs. But how wonderful is it, that we continued to believe in each other.

Fifteen years later. It has proven possible to break away from a vicious circle and to establish a bond with a child, a wife and with society in general.

My experiences with Exodus have taught me it is very hard for prisoners to build up a new life. But it is possible. By believing in people, by investing in people and by making possibilities in society, and looking for anchor points in community: the spiral of crime can be broken.

It is my conviction that investing in people is the best crime prevention.

Thank you for your attention.