

Sycamore Tree: Victim awareness and Restorative Justice

Anne Mason is a Consultant at Sycamore Tree, an intensive programme running in prisons across the country. Sycamore Tree brings together unconnected victims and offenders with the aim of raising victim awareness among prisoners whilst providing victims with an opportunity to share their stories and gain insights into the behaviour of offenders. We look forward to hearing about the stories and people involved in the programme in a future edition of Resolution, but first Anne informs us about the programme itself.

Prison Fellowship International (PFI) is the world's largest and most extensive criminal justice ministry - a global association of over 100 national Prison Fellowship organisations. PFI's Centre for Justice and Reconciliation promotes restorative justice initiatives that work to heal broken relationships, repair the damage done by crime and restore the offender to a meaningful role in society.

Sycamore Tree was developed by PFI and first run in Houston (USA), then in New Zealand. It was first run in England and Wales at HMP The Mount in 1998 and has since expanded to run in 34 prisons of all security categories, with more than 12,000 offenders having taken part since its start.

Sycamore Tree is an in-prison programme run over 6 sessions (usually one per week) that aims to challenge prisoners' attitudes to offending behaviour; raise awareness of the impact of crime on victims and communities; and teach the principles and application of Restorative Justice. Sycamore Tree seeks to provide offenders with an opportunity to make an informed choice to change their lives.



Volunteers at a training event

The name 'Sycamore Tree' is taken from the New Testament Bible story of Zacchaeus, a thieving tax collector who made amends to his victims and community. The programme is faith based but it is not faith promoting. Sycamore Tree is offered to all faiths and people with no faith. If interest in Christianity is expressed as a result of the programme, the offender is told they can explore their interest through the Chaplaincy and Alpha courses.

"I am entirely committed to the Sycamore Tree course... the benefits are evident with regard to reducing re-offending and properly resettling offenders." Prison Governor

Sycamore Tree was awarded accredited status by OCN (Open College Network) in 2003, and Prison Fellowship is an OCN approved centre of learning. Accreditation by an external body such as OCN validates the programme with clear aims and

objectives, measurable learning outcomes, and professional standards.

Alongside anecdotal feedback a psychometric questionnaire called Crime Pics II is used to measure changes in each prisoners' attitudes after taking part in Sycamore Tree. An evaluation of more than 2,000 Crime Pics questionnaires was conducted by Sheffield Hallam University and indicates that the programme reduces attitudes that are known to be conducive to offending behaviour.

Additionally Prison Fellowship has recently commissioned a research project, supervised by Professor Lawrence Sherman of Cambridge University, to demonstrate Sycamore Tree's effect on reducing reoffending. At the heart of this project will be a randomised control trial, which will rigorously compare recidivism of adult male participants and non-participants. The project will measure the frequency and severity of re-offending of the offenders within one year and also two years of release. The research will provide evidence for Prison Fellowship and significant policy-makers of the economic and human value of this programme.

The future holds three key challenges for Prison Fellowship and Sycamore Tree to address: continued and sustainable funding, compliance with the accreditation requirements of Prison Service Order 4350 'Effective Regime Interventions' and the recruitment, training and support of volunteer tutors, victims and group facilitators to present the programme.

Prison Fellowship England and Wales was formed in 1979 as a Christian faith-based voluntary sector organisation to restore all those affected by crime.

www.sycamoretree.org.uk
01621 843232



Sycamore Tree, Birmingham