

LATEST HEADLINES

Monday, August 24th 2009

A LISTENING EAR IN DIFFICULT TIMES

- Are you prepared to go to court and stay for a year?
- Would you be able to talk to a down-and-out who is in court for theft?
- How would you talk to parents, in court to support their child charged with a serious offence?

Anyone able to respond positively to these questions, and with time to spare, might consider applying to join Bradford's Court Chaplaincy Service. This does not mean joining a religious institution and preaching, far from it. Going to court can be a confusing or frightening experience. Court chaplains are there to offer confidential, nonjudgmental practical support — but only if it is requested.



Court chaplains Latif Mir and Dr Barry Barton with Support & Development Officer Bryan Rulton (right)

Set up on July 1 with sponsorship funding the next two years, the service is an independent, non-sectarian, multi-faith charity dedicated to helping all court users.

The first of its kind in the country the idea of a court chaplaincy stems from an observation eight or nine years ago by His Honour Judge Clifford Bellamy, who was then sitting in Leeds.

He referred to “the sea of misery” he saw in the court system. This inspired Bradford JP Mrs. Mary Carroll to set about getting financial support to create the chaplaincy.



Mary Carroll JP

Mrs. Carroll, chairman of the trust that runs the chaplaincy, said: “We think there is an enormous need for this service to deal with the mass of human pain and misery we see every day in this court. “There isn't one elsewhere, so we are leading the way, and we hope it will be a forerunner for others to follow.”

At the moment there are two chaplains in Bradford, the Rev Dr Barry Barton and Mohammed Latif Mir, backed up by support and development officer Bryan Rulton at the Magistrates Court. But they are hoping to recruit another 24 ‘listeners’, as they call them, between now and September 23, when selection and then training start. Dr Barton said: “Because of the delicate nature of the work, applicants will have to fill in a form, provide a couple of references, go through an enhanced Criminal Bureau Records check, and then an interview” Training will be one afternoon a week over 12 weeks at the Magistrates Court and at Bradford Hospitals Trust, which already operates a network of chaplains — hospital visitors.

Telegraph & Argus

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Latif Mir said: "Once the volunteers are up and running we can move into the Crown Court and Bingley Magistrates Court as well. We are here to listen, not to judge."

"Volunteers will be proactive," Dr Barton said. Though a vicar, he does not wear a dog collar at court, for reasons that he later explained.

"They will have the skills and the confidence to approach people on the concourse outside the courts, say who they are and leave it to individuals to decide whether they want a discussion.

"What we do is totally separate from court procedure and is totally confidential. We are not allowed to preach religious belief, nor are we permitted to offer legal advice. We cannot comment on the outcome of a case."

Bryan Rulton offered a recent example. He said: "A homeless man appeared here, thought he could not claim for benefits because he had nowhere to live. We contacted an agency, they got him emergency accommodation, gave him some food and a bit of money by sorting out his benefits. Maybe that would help him..."

Court chaplains have to be good listeners, broad-minded, patient, trustworthy, sympathetic, outgoing, and willing to complete the training course and prepared to commit half a day a week for at least 12 months.

The expectation is that those who complete the training course, which runs from September 23 to December 16, will start work in January next year.

Support and professional development opportunities will be offered, along with a chance to meet interesting people and make a real difference in people's lives.

If you are interested in volunteering for the chaplaincy, contact Bryan Rulton on (01274) 722422. Applications have to be in by September 9th.