

The Prison Chaplain

– a safe conversation partner

As prison chaplain, Reidar Faanes is a companion to both inmates and employees at Halden Prison.

“I love talking with people, and 80 per cent of my work involves conversations with employees and inmates. Is it strange that I feel privileged?” Reidar asks, looking back on 20 years as a prison chaplain.

He has been employed by Halden since it opened, and has shaped the chaplaincy based on his own experiences and following his own heart.

Enjoys great confidence

The prison chaplain often wanders amongst the inmates, and experiences great respect and confidence, even from the most hardened prisoners.

“The chaplain is very much an institution of its own within a prison, and one that everyone wants to talk to - knowing full well that anything said remains between us. I’m probably the only expert here who doesn’t write reports,” he says.

This means they perceive the chaplain as a ‘harmless’ and safe conversation partner, regardless of religious background.

“Yes, I’m chaplain to all, and am just as happy talking to Muslims and atheists as I am to Christians. Not least, I have time to meet them all.”

If there is a serious crisis inside the walls, it is the prison chaplain who is called. Prison chaplain Reidar Faanes conducts follow-up conversations with employees and inmates who have been through traumatic experiences.

The chaplain also acts as a conversation partner, supervisor and coach for employees. They often discuss real situations they have been in, and how to best approach difficult episodes on an emotional level.

The prison chaplain has many duties, and is an important spiritual advisor and conversation partner for inmates and employees. He is sometimes an important link between inmates and their relatives.



“What about the religious aspect related to your role as chaplain and your own point of view?”

“My clear principle is that I talk about what the inmates want to talk about. I never take the initiative to talk about religious subjects,” he says.

However, he quickly adds that many who seek him out want to discuss existential issues, precisely because he represents a faith and hope that people can change.

“Eight out of 10 inmates want to get out of the life of crime. My only agenda is to help them on their way!”

“What is it that characterises the inmates you meet?”

“Many are struggling with low self-esteem and no one believes that they are capable of change. Crime is basically their fate in this life. I help them to change mindset and see the opportunities. To look ahead. There’s always some good in every person, which I try to find and strengthen through conversation.”

“It’s never too late to change. As long as you can breathe, you can make new choices.”

A lot of aggression

Many have the burden of pent-up aggression, and the prison chaplain is often vented at and on the receiving end of loud frustration.

“When they’re alone with me, they can shout and hit the walls if they feel like it. I handle it and try to understand. Many have experienced a lot of betrayal in life and have little faith in the state’s attempts to help them. There is often a bad story at the bottom of it all that has shaped them.

But it’s no good them behaving badly towards fellow inmates and employees. They are only harming themselves,” he points out. It is not uncommon that he acts as an intermediary between two people who have unsettled business from before they began their sentences.

Communication is the key

“I teach them to communicate better, and how to make the best of their sentence. You don’t get anywhere by being angry or demanding.”

If they want to get out of the vicious circle and out of the criminal life, he makes clear that they have to admit their fragility in order to bring about lasting change. It is not enough to just be in prison - it has to be taken care of and worked with.

As a result of a recognition of this kind, he finds that perpetrators want to meet their victim to tell them about their regret and that they accept all blame. The chaplain then arranges a meeting through the conflict resolution board.

“It is a beautiful experience, which often contributes to alleviating the fear of the victim.”

Every opportunity

There is every opportunity to achieve permanent change here at Halden Prison, but Faanes also draws attention to the importance of following up with inmates after they complete their sentences.

“It’s no good if they

overcome their addictions here and get an education, if they end up back in the same network as before. Just one mistake and the road back to crime is short.”

Faanes has previously worked in prisons where inmates were locked in their cells for 20 hours per day, and experienced the results of this.

“There was rarely a day that passed without a cell fire, self-harm, suicide attempts or fights. I was running from one crisis to another.”

He praises the way in which the Norwegian Correctional Service has changed for the better, and refers specifically to Halden Prison as proof that the humane approach works in practice.

As well as the main prison chaplain, Reidar Faanes, there is another chaplaincy position connected to Halden Prison.

Doesn't
bring up
religion

Big Rush To Attend Services

The prison chaplain organises services three Sundays per month. As a rule, every seat in 'the Holy Room' is filled on these occasions.

There is space for 30 in the congregation, and those who wish to attend need to register. Reidar Faanes explains that there is normally a full house during services consisting of inmates with many different religious beliefs. This is an important meeting place for many.

"Many of the crosses here have been made by the inmates, which tells you something about the importance of having a faith as a foundation in life."

During the course of the gathering, candles are lit and communion given.

"Everyone participates in the lighting of candles - it can be for a child, a mother, a loved one, or hope. And most also take communion," he says.

Christmas Eve

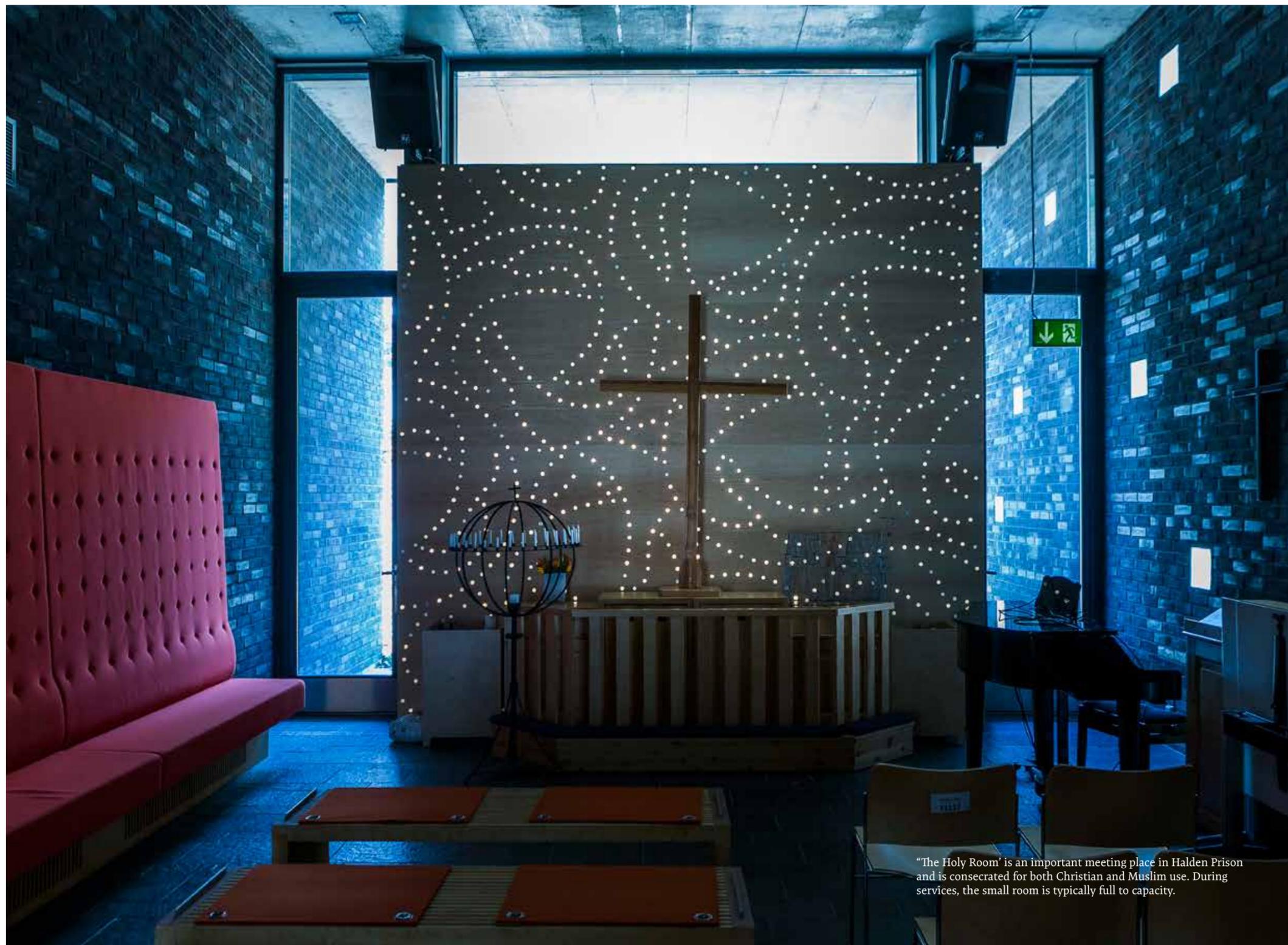
Christmas Eve is a special day even in prison. The service is moved into the gym because of the large numbers in attendance.

"There can be up to 120 inmates, of which 80 take communion. It's striking to see the long queue of inmates who want to participate in the Christian, ritual act involving bread and wine."

Prayer gathering

Many Muslim inmates participate in services, and are also offered a prayer meeting every Friday. A prayer leader comes from a local mosque to conduct a communal prayer meeting in the Holy Room, which is consecrated for both Christian use and Muslim prayers.

"In this area we also try to follow the principle of normality by ensuring that the inmates receive the same provisions they would in wider society, as much as is possible," emphasises the prison chaplain.



"The Holy Room' is an important meeting place in Halden Prison and is consecrated for both Christian and Muslim use. During services, the small room is typically full to capacity.