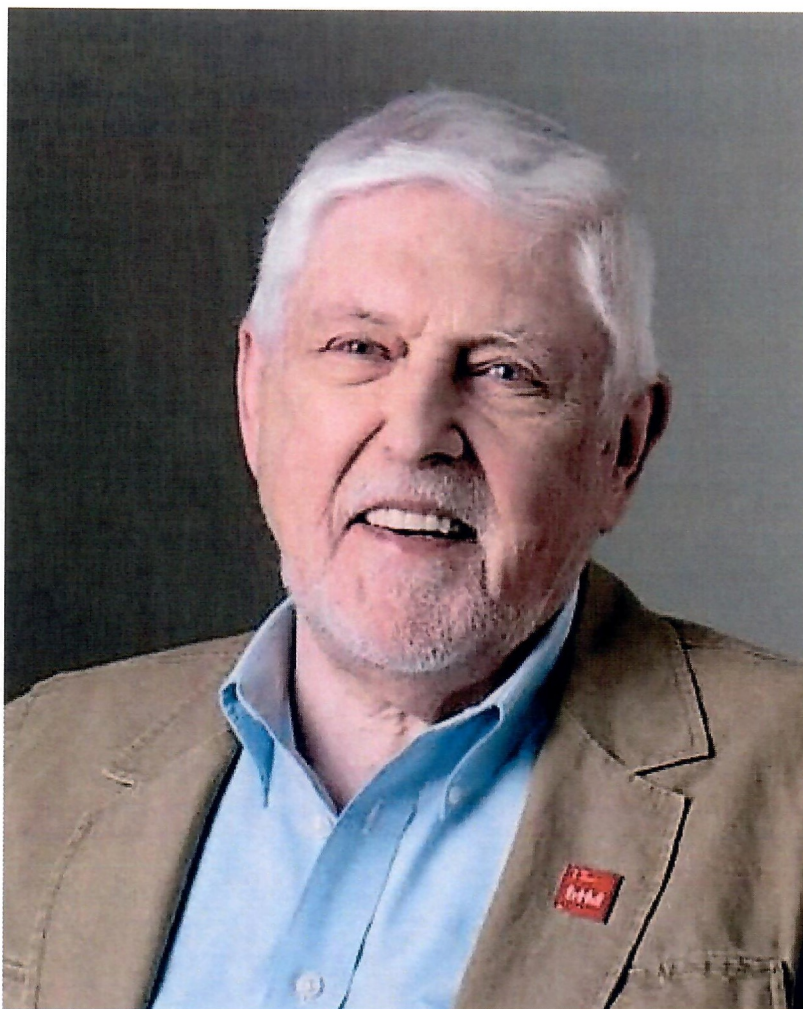


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'Adopt-A-Prison' concept, born in Bedford, gains global traction

By JEFF MORRIS
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Hans Hallundbaek
Town of Bedford

In 2019, Hans Hallundbaek, then the director of the Interfaith Prison Partnership, had an idea that grew out of something he had seen soon after coming to the U.S. from his native Denmark. In fact, it was something that struck him as odd.

According to Sharon Griest Ballon, chair of Bedford's Prison Relations Advisory Committee, he made note of the many Adopt-A-Highway signs he saw along roads. "They were something new to him," she told The Record-Review. "He had not seen any such concept in Denmark." The idea stuck, and reemerged years later after he attended theological seminary and became involved in prison work.

As Mr. Hallundbaek's involvement grew with the two women's prisons in Bedford Hills, he thought, "If we can adopt a highway, why not our local prison?" Thus was born the "Adopt-A-Prison" event, held in Bedford Town Hall in September 2019. The event drew a wide range of attendees: the superintendents of both Bedford Hills and Taconic Correctional Facilities; local and state elected officials; over 100 community members; and speakers from 18 prison volunteer groups from faith, academic, justice, legal, rehabilitation, human rights and reentry organizations.

The success of that event led then-supervisor Chris Burdick to suggest formation of the prison relations advisory committee, which was believed to be the first such committee formed by any town in the country. The Bedford Town Board quickly agreed to establish PRAC, involving administrators from the two prisons and people representing organizations with involvement in correctional facilities.

Flash forward to October 2021, when Mr. Hallundbaek announced he was stepping down from daily leadership of the Interfaith Prison Partnership. In a retirement interview, Mr. Hallundbaek told The Record-Review that he now had the time to "do other things."

Clearly, neither his retirement nor his octogenarian status has slowed Mr. Hallundbaek down. In a March update on his activities, he informed us that Adopt-A-Prison had "most probably saved lives in our two local prisons during COVID, and has been written up in national magazines." He said he was working on promoting the concept to other parts of the country and abroad, "not only because it helps incarcerated people, but allows the surrounding community to recognize and reach out to those sequestered in their midst."

In early May, Mr. Hallundbaek traveled to Nairobi, Kenya, to bring the AAP concept to the ninth international Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants, or CURE, Conference on Human Rights & Criminal Justice Reform. The conference drew 95 participants representing

28 countries, with prison chaplains and prison reformers from five continents. CURE is a grassroots effort by people in prison and their families, former prisoners and other concerned citizens that aims to reduce crime through criminal justice reform.

Upon his return from his Kenya, Mr. Hallundbaek wrote about the conference for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) newsletter. “While the conference concluded that prison reform is still an urgent need in many countries,” he wrote, “what became clear was the urgent and important need of better treatment of women in prison.” In an obvious callback to his close knowledge of the Bedford Hills and Taconic facilities, he noted that the proportion of females in prison compared to men is increasing globally, and in most countries that increase is not reflected in proper attention to the special needs of women in prison and their children.

Mr. Hallundbaek, who is an ordained minister, called particular attention to another recommendation highlighted at the conference: to foster enhanced local community engagement with neighboring prisons, “as scripturally suggested in Matthew 25:43: ‘... I was in prison, and you did not visit me.’” This idea of engaging communities in their local prisons, he wrote, “has been modeled in the U.S. based on its Adopt-A-Highway concept.” Through his article, he was able to inform the larger Presbyterian community that Adopt-A-Prison has been successfully introduced, practiced and perfected in maximum-security Bedford Hills and medium-security Taconic, which together hold close to 1,000 incarcerated women.

The Adopt-A-Prison concept has now been piloted in Kenya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Pakistan, said Mr. Hallundbaek. “The AAP program was well received at the conference and recognized as a timely gospel-inspired concept,” he said. “From an interfaith harmony perspective, it is encouraging to note that in Pakistan the AAP program is now piloted by two separate Christian and Muslim organizations.”

Impressively, this global movement has taken place just since Mr. Hallundbaek first came up with the idea in 2017. Ms. Ballen recalled when the former IPP director first introduced the concept. “He told me about it and who could think anything but, it’s a wonderful idea. He went to Chris Burdick with it and asked if he had any interest, and Chris said, ‘absolutely.’ Hans and Chris and I brought the superintendents from both facilities in, and they were part of every planning meeting and on board from day one — they thought it was a great idea to engage the community.”

There was a two-year planning process for the 2019 event, said Ms. Ballen. “I did all the logistical planning,” she said, “but it was all Hans — his contacts, people he knew.” She recounted how the crowd was standing-room-only, with attendees highly engaged and reluctant to leave after the event formally ended. Based on the success of the event, it was Mr. Burdick who suggested that the Town of Bedford should form a committee to advise it specifically on issues related to the correctional facilities, Ms. Ballen said. She also noted that after Mr. Burdick’s election to the state Assembly, he agreed to serve on the state Assembly’s Corrections Committee. To assist him in that role, he has established a community committee to advise him and other policy makers. Ms. Ballen is a member of that committee.

Mr. Hallundbaek said he credits the local community for the increasing acceptance of the Adopt-A-Prison approach. He expressed thanks to community members “for embracing the AAP concept and donating so generously to inmates and staff at the two prisons in our midst.”

Jeff Morris