

Press release – March 2018

**THE KOESTLER TRUST AND THE PRISONS MISSION OF
CHURCHES TOGETHER IN WESTMINSTER PRESENT
‘FIRST IMPRESSIONS - PORTRAITS FROM PRISON’**

The UK’s best-known prison arts charity has been invited to curate an exhibition touring central London churches. The exhibition tour of ‘First Impressions’ will start at St James’s Church, Piccadilly on Wednesday 21 March 2018. It will go on to Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church and St-Martin-in-the-Fields later in the year.

This is the first time the two London-based organisations have partnered to bring the talent and skill of ex-offenders to the attention of the public. The Koestler Trust has been encouraging participation in the arts by people in the criminal justice system, and showcasing it to the public, since 1962. It is renowned for its innovative engagement and curatorial approaches – in 2017 the Trust presented ‘Inside’, an exhibition curated by Antony Gormley, at Southbank Centre, and ‘Beyond the Door,’ an exhibition curated by young offenders at Birmingham mac.

‘First Impressions’ will feature a range of portraits using diverse approaches to portraiture and showing viewers the potential of those in the criminal justice system. Most of the portraits have been created in prisons, with some created in other settings, such as secure forensic hospitals and by people on probation. All of the portraits come from over 7,500 pieces of fine art, design, writing and music, entered into the Koestler Awards annually. They represent the national spread of the Trust, with work from London and across the UK.

The exhibition will be opened by Jonathan Aitken who will discuss the benefit of art in the rehabilitation of prisoners based on his own experiences. Throughout the exhibition tour the Prisons Mission will hold a series of talks involving high profile individuals within the Prison system speaking to the title “Can Prisons Work. For Offenders? For Victims? For Taxpayers? Dates and times will be announced on the Koestler Trust website.

Visitors will be encouraged to feedback to the artists on their work through special feedback cards in the exhibition space offering a unique opportunity for exchange and learning.

Jonathan Aitken, prison reformist said on opening the show: *"I know, from my own experience, while serving a prison sentence, that art of many kinds, can make a significant difference in the recovery and rehabilitation of offenders."*

Sally Taylor, Chief Executive, Koestler Trust: *"The Koestler Trust is delighted to be partnering with Churches Together in Westminster to bring art from the Koestler Awards right into the heart of the Churches' communities. It is part of the mission of the Koestler Trust to change the way that the public view offenders and we hope that visitors will be inspired and moved by their art."*

John Plummer, Prisons Mission: *"We are delighted to be hosting this exhibition of artworks by prisoners, shining a light for our parishioners and visitors to these churches on the restorative power of art and the difficulties that have to be overcome to achieve it. Prisons must become places of hope and recovery and we must do more to support the multi-faith Chaplaincy Teams and lead towards the transformation of our prisons. Prisoners are out of sight. They must not also be out of mind."*

-Ends-

Notes to editors

- **Listings information**

'First Impressions – Portraits from Prison'
21 Mar – 9 Apr 2018 (exhibition closed 29 to 31 March)
Open daily, 9am – 6:30pm
St James's Church, Piccadilly
Entrance is free

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- The **Koestler Trust** is the UK's best-known prison arts charity, working across the whole of the British criminal justice system – in prisons, secure hospitals, immigration centres, young offender institutions and in the community.

The Trust runs the annual Koestler Awards to motivate people to participate in the arts, and to showcase the talent and potential of people in the criminal justice system to the public. Around 3,000 people enter the Awards each year. Entrants receive feedback and certificates, can be selected for public exhibitions or mentoring, and may sell their visual artwork. The Trust holds a programme of exhibitions and events each year around the UK. The biggest is the annual exhibition at London's Southbank Centre, which over 20,000 people visit.

Each of the 52 categories (such as computer generated music, spoken word, sculpture, animation, fashion, portrait, fiction and poetry) are judged by experts in the field. Recent Awards judges include leading professionals such as Turner Prize-

winning artist Jeremy Deller; ceramic designer Emma Bridgewater; and documentary filmmaker Louis Theroux.

The Trust's public programmes in 2018 include 'One Hundred Years On,' an art trail of works submitted to the Koestler Awards by women prisoners, 'Chip Night' an exhibition curated by young people at Firstsite in Colchester, and its annual showcase at Southbank Centre, which this year will be curated by prisoners' families.

- **Prisons Mission of Churches Together in Westminster**

Churches Together in Westminster is a grouping of some 80 churches of all denominations in central London. Its Prison Mission is an initiative that provides support and assistance identified and needed by the multi-faith Chaplaincy Teams in prisons.

Currently members of the Mission are helping in a number of London prisons: HMPs Wormwood Scrubs, Wandsworth and, Bronzefield, and most recently the Immigration Removal Centre at Heathrow. Practising their Christian Mission with a vulnerable and neglected section of our society, volunteers provide support in a variety of ways, whatever is useful and sought by the various Chaplains.

Some Prisons Mission participants attend worship and bible study with prisoners in the prison chapels and, for the first time this year, one group are getting involved with leading some Catholic services, notably at Easter.

Other participants have been involved in more secular support activities. These include befriending prisoners pre and post discharge 'through the gate'; the value being that of a mentor and steadying hand in matters of housing, employment and a return to life outside prison.

Additionally, volunteers have elected to work with discharged sex offenders, another isolated and vulnerable group. This is difficult but well supported and rewarding work. There are also opportunities for qualified volunteers to assist with crucial counselling and educational support.

With these activities in mind it is worth reflecting on the sobering facts that as many as 50% of all prisoners are functionally illiterate; incidents of self-harm are at an all-time high and a high proportion of adults leaving London prisons with the £47 discharge grant are of 'no fixed abode'.

A final crucial objective of the Mission is to ensure that whilst the 85,000 men and women currently detained behind prison walls in England and Wales may be out of sight, they must not be out of mind. The intent is to inform their congregations about prisons, prisoners, their families, prison staff, victims of crime and issues concerning the prison system.