

# Prison alternatives studied Elizabeth Fry Society told



Gillian Sandeman

By Lindy Oughtred

The consideration of alternatives to imprisonment is becoming an internationally-acknowledged concern, according to Gillian Sandeman, executive director of the Toronto branch of the Elizabeth Fry Society.

Sandeman, speaking at the eighth annual meeting of the volunteer organization's Peel-Halton branch, told of her part in last October's United Nations (U.N.) Congress on the Prevention of Crime and Treatment of Offenders, held in Caracas, Venezuela. There, the 44-member Canadian delegation, which included both government and voluntary agency representatives, presented two resolutions to the congress. One was in favor of an international prisoner exchange program; the other supported alternatives to imprisonment.

"The idea of alternatives originally came from the Howard League in England," Sandeman explained. The Howard League is the John Howard Society's British cousin.

"They presented a tough resolution—that imprisonment be used rarely, and only for dangerous offenders. They felt that the notion of mandatory sentences for minimum offences should be reconsidered."

Although the resolution did not pass as originally written, it was the first congress (there have been six to date) where alternatives to imprisonment were discussed.

"Eventually, people will find out that if you imprison less people the crime rates won't go up," Sandeman said.

When discussing the matter with a judge from Holland, a country unique for its low incarceration rates, Sandeman asked how the change in public attitude toward the viability of imprisoning offenders had evolved. In that country, a five year sentence is considered unusually harsh.

The judge replied that the first step was in convincing the judiciary that imprisonment isn't always the answer, as they pass the sentences.

"He himself was upset when he found he had to give a two year sentence.

the same way as a Canadian judge would be upset about passing a 25 year sentence," Sandeman commented.

The two week congress, attended by justice and corrections officials from all over the world, is designed to provide standard rules on the treatment of offenders at an international level. In effect, its purpose is to "shame and embarrass" non-progressive countries into meeting certain regulations.

"Canada doesn't always meet these rules in its prisons," Sandeman pointed out. Nevertheless, a definite level of improvement in the treatment of offenders world-wide can be traced to such UN activities as the congress. "I found that, at an international level, things move very slowly—but they do move."

Sandeman, in her capacity as an Elizabeth Fry member, represented one of the few voluntary agencies involved in justice and corrections (as well as one of the few women) attending the congress. As such, she found the most lively debates were those run by the non-governmental sector.

"We didn't have to phone home to Ottawa to check what to say," she laughed. "We could speak from the heart."

The second resolution backed by the Canadian delegation concerned exchange agreements between member nations.

As the far corners of the earth become more and more accessible to the modern traveller, the possibility of ending up in a foreign prison increases. The resolution involves an agreement between two countries allowing prisoners to return to their home base and serve sentences there.

"It's better to serve your sentence near home, because that facilitates reintegration into society," Sandeman said.

The Canadian delegation also proposed giving the prisoner the right to decide whether he wished to return to his native country or remain in a foreign prison. However, members were unable to persuade other countries, particularly those with a

common market, that the prisoner's consent was important.

"Some of the countries which depend on migrant labor don't want to support these people in their prisons—they just want to send them home," Sandeman said. "The final amendment reads, 'either with the consent of the prisoner or in his interest.'"

Many of the same people who were arguing in Venezuela for the offender's rights on an international level will not do so in Canada, she added.

"Within our federal system, you can ship someone anywhere in the name of peace and quiet," she noted. "Of the operant principle is the reintegration of people into society, how can we have principles on an international scale, but not at home?"

Since the Elizabeth Fry Society is concerned with the female offender, Sandeman was also interested in presenting a resolution about the specific needs of women prisoners.

"There are only a small number of women offenders around the world, and they do not receive the same attention as the men," she explained. "We asked the congress to consider alternatives for women and men."

Sandeman's interest in corrections began in 1972 when she served as a volunteer with the Probation Service, later becoming a probation and parole officer for the Ministry of Correctional Services.

From 1975 to 1977, she acted as a member of the provincial parliament, was Corrections Critic for the Ontario New

Democratic party caucus, and belonged to the Standing Committee on the Administration of Justice.

She was appointed executive director of the

Elizabeth Fry Society, Toronto branch, in 1978. Formerly, she was an editorial commentator and news broadcaster for CHEX radio and television in Peterborough.

Sandeman is also president elect of the Canadian Association for the Prevention of Crime and a board member of Nelle's Hostel in Toronto.

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