

BRINGING THE POWER OF GROUPS TO PRISON MINISTRY

On the two-hour drive back from the federal penitentiary, Pastor Eduardo reflected on his visit with a church member who was recently incarcerated. It was the pastor's first prison visit, and though he'd wished he could have talked ahead of time with someone experienced in such matters, the meeting met his expectations reasonably. The two men spoke of family and church life, the pastor shared news from the community, and they discussed the man's questions about how to study the Bible. On the drive home, Eduardo wondered how the man's family was holding up and what role the congregation could play.

Imprisonment can be isolating not only for the incarcerated but also for their family and friends. Prison ministry (defined broadly to include city and county jails, juvenile detention centers, and state and federal correctional facilities) seeks to alleviate this distress and offer a dose of compassion. When a family of an incarcerated individual isolates itself, it may be a means of coping with awkward circumstances. For those engaged in prison ministry, however, a go-it-alone strategy can be counterproductive. It takes a group to do this ministry effectively.

The Power and Limits of One

One person can make a difference. Witness the effect of someone who befriends an incarcerated person and offers letters on a regular basis over many weeks and months that express compassion and bring news from outside. By doing so, the writer may not only help the prisoner overcome loneliness, but also increase the likelihood of a better reentry after release, according to research cited by Wire of Hope (WOH), a non-profit agency that encourages letters to the imprisoned (<https://wireofhope.com>). Yet individual support functions most effectively with team or organizational back up. WOH offers safeguards such as requiring that writers be at least eighteen years old, urging that no money or gifts be sent, and verifying that all information

provided by inmates is accurate. Without group help, well-meaning individuals can bring harm to themselves or others.

Going it alone can lead to trouble in person-to-person visitations as well. The Rev. Dr. Sandra Jenkins, a psychology professor and liaison to Pennsylvania prisons, warns that church-based visitors can do harm without sufficient advice and help from a prison administrator or chaplain. Ask what is needed before offering to help. Beyond this, an unconscious judgmentalism can lead visitors to "talk down" to the incarcerated and erode trust. To counter this, read books by prisoners about their own experience or talk with a prison chaplain about what prison is like. A humble approach, a willingness to be self-critical, and a desire to get help from those who are more experienced can be critical.¹

In recent years, a number of established prison ministry programs have shifted from individual to group methods to serve the incarcerated. Kairos Prison Ministry (<https://www.kairosprisonministry.org>) focuses its



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work on “creating community” through group events such as weekend retreats with lectures, group discussions, and chapel meditations. The weekend is followed by the formation of “Prayer-and-Share” groups that meet weekly. Interfaith Prison Ministry for Women (<http://www.ipmforwomen.org>) prepares women in prison to transition back into society by offering one-to-one mentoring. As soon as the sixteen-week course is completed, women are eligible to join a support group to strengthen their personal development. Prison Fellowship (<https://www.prisonfellowship.org>) places a similar emphasis on groups (Bible study, worship services, and workshops) and it recommends that anyone wanting to get started in prison ministry join an established team first. Of course, some churches may wish to start their own prison ministry, a strategy that could be effective as long as they partner with a prison chaplain or with a social worker with experience in corrections.

Enlisting the Congregation

Prison ministry teams may want to expand their work to include the entire congregation. Three examples show how this could be done.

St. Dymas of South Dakota, part of the Evangelical Church in America, is a single congregation with two locations: the South Dakota State Penitentiary in Sioux Falls and the Mike Durfee State Penitentiary in Springfield. Served by the Reverend Wayne Gallipo and the Reverend David Bentz, the congregation serves about 140 men. At worship every Thursday evening in Sioux Falls, the congregation receives about fifteen to twenty visitors from outside. “It may be the only day of the week that an inmate has had any interaction with someone that is not paid to be there” and that “they are not addressed by their inmate number, cell number, or last name.” It is a “tangible sign” that the men are not forgotten.²

Freedom Now Ministry, a program of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore, Maryland, serves men who have just been released from prison. Founded by Jake Colbert, the program offers help for reentry into society, addiction recovery, and outreach to drug users and dealers in the immediate neighborhood. A former drug dealer himself, Colbert was recruited by the pastor, Rev. Dr. Frank Madison Reid, to start the program after attending the church while on parole and in recovery. Bethel AME serves 3,000 worshippers each weekend. At the 11:45 service, the

first three or four rows are reserved for “Jake’s Men,” as they are called.³

Northern Lighthouse Church in Lincoln, Nebraska (<https://www.northernlighthouse.net>), offers outreach to men and women incarcerated at the Community Corrections Center—Lincoln and has programs for those in recovery or struggling financially. When the Rev. Sam Keyzer launched the new congregation in 1997, only five persons showed up on the first Sunday. One of them asked the pastor if he could invite a friend enrolled in a work release program, which allows inmates to work during the day and report to the prison in the evening. The pastor agreed, and the congregation began to grow as friend invited friend from within the work release program.

Addressing Larger Issues

As groups like Prison Fellowship have come to recognize, prison ministry takes place within a larger social context that calls for advocacy on behalf of prison reform. With 5% of the world’s population and 25% of its prison population, the U.S. prison population is massive compared to the rest of the world. This is partly the result of policies leading to mass incarceration in the last twenty-five years with Black and brown populations targeted disproportionately in the U.S. “drug war.”⁴ Going forward, this social reality will require collective action for systemic change.

Resources

- Goode, W. Wilson Sr., Lewis, Charles E. Jr., Trulear, Harold Dean. 2011. *Ministry with Prisoners & Families: The Way Forward*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press.
- Heavner, Betsey. 2004. *Congregational Tool Box for Prison Ministry (PDF)*, Discipleship Resources, United Methodist Church. 23 pages. Available from The Upper Room (<https://bookstore.upperroom.org>) for \$8.00.

1. Sandra S. Jenkins, “Six Rules of Thumb for Prison Ministry,” Discipleship Resources, United Methodist Church, October 16, 2016, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/six-rules-of-thumb-for-prison-ministry>.

2. Wayne Gallipo, “The Church behind Prison Walls: God’s Radical Grace Transforming Lives,” *Word and World* (Vol. 38, No. 4, Fall 2018), 382-389.

3. Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 204-206.

4. Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012).