

CHAPTER THREE

MINISTERING IN A CITY JAIL

Almost every city or large political subdivision has a local lockup or county jail. This temporary holding activity is used to detain men and women who are awaiting trial or legal hearings. Many of these jails are old, overcrowded and dirty. Often short prison sentences are actually served in these institutions. All types of prisoners can be found here from the first offenders to the hardened criminal. As a result, this ministry offers an unusual opportunity right in your own hometown to reach prisoners for Jesus Christ and minister to them at a time when they are experiencing a dramatic change in their daily lives. The trauma of arrest and incarceration will occasionally jolt a new inmate into a serious evaluation of priorities and present lifestyle. This is an excellent time to talk to these new prisoners about salvation.

There are three things that you should keep in mind as you start to minister in the county or city jail. **First:** Much of your effectiveness will depend on understanding each type of inmate held in this institution. This may take some training and experience, but the officials in charge of the jail can assist you in evaluating each classification if you ask them for help. **Second:** Certain prisoners are kept in these local jails for a very short time. Your first contact may be your only chance to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to them. Be prepared to offer an effective testimony on the first visit without being overbearing or offensive. **Third:** No one can adequately explain what it is like to be locked up day after day, because a prison experience is a terrible thing. Be aware that you are ministering under extreme stress and trauma conditions. While inmates are more receptive to your Gospel presentation in this situation, the stage is also set for future hate and distrust of society. Your Christian testimony can help to prevent this serious social problem.

It is easier to start a new prison ministry if two or three concerned Christians go to the jail together. Try to arrange with the authorities for a special time each week for your visit that will not conflict with regular family or lawyer visiting hours. Saturday afternoon or Sunday morning are among the best available times. If you and your Christian group are the only visitors at the jail, you will get all the attention from both the staff and the inmates. These visits will be anticipated by prisoners who spend several weeks in the institution and they will look forward to your next call. There is less discipline trouble in a prison that allows regular Christian visits. Trained law enforcement officers know that religious visits by dedicated Christians cut the so-called “incident rate” in any jail. They will be inclined to help you even if they are not Christians themselves. It would be beneficial for anyone considering a prison ministry to join a group going into a jail in a nearby town for several weeks to get “on-the-job” training and experience. The techniques you will acquire in a short time will make the necessary travel well worthwhile.

There are 10 steps you should take to have an effective ministry in the local jail.

1. Pray daily for this ministry and everyone involved in it. Start each prison visit with prayer.
2. Keep a definite schedule without interruption. Prisoners will anticipate your regular visits.
3. Dress conservatively. A suit coat is never out of place in jail although a tie isn't necessary. Clergymen may wear collars for identification if they wish.
4. Don't give the prisoners anything without first checking with authorities. Stay well within the established rules of the jail.
5. Don't ask the prisoners for details about their criminal case. Often these charges are pending trial or appeal. If you learn anything about their legal status, be sure to keep it confidential.
6. Don't expect a normal response. Conditions in jail are not normal. You are reaching the inmate with your testimony even if he doesn't respond immediately, so don't be discouraged.
7. Whenever possible, arrange for a follow-up by a local church to minister to the offender after he is released.

8. Be forgiving. The justice system is tough enough without your personal judgment and condemnation. Be a true minister of the Gospel and radiate the love of God in your visit.
9. Focus your ministry on the heart of the Gospel. Most prisoners have little church background and do not understand theological differences.
10. “Remember the prisoners as though in prison with them . . .” (Hebrews 13:3). Put yourself in the prisoners place and try to understand the way they think.

There are enormous differences in jails from one town to the next. In some urban areas they are virtual fortresses with large high-rise buildings. In sparsely populated areas the entire unit may consist of one cell. Christians need to get acquainted with their local situation and adapt their calls and their Christian ministry to the facilities that exist. Above all, however, is the need to make regular contact at this institution to be assured that no prisoner passes through the local jail without some form of witness from a local Christian.

The county or city jail offers the average citizen a real opportunity to do mission work right in his own home town in a ministry that most Christians neglect. The local lockup contains souls that need the Gospel of Jesus Christ just as certainly as any foreign mission field and it is located near your own home.