

## CHAPTER NINE

### THE HALF-WAY HOUSE

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The so-called minimum security unit, or half-way house or prison farm, is just another word for relaxed custody. When an inmate is deemed to be “safe” (as most of them are) and the remaining sentence is short enough so there is sufficient incentive for the inmate to stay put in a low supervision prison, he may be transferred out of the medium or maximum security prison to the half-way house or its equivalent. There is a great opportunity to minister here because visiting is expanded and the rules are relaxed to some extent. No single custody arrangement has a better climate for ministry because aids and helps like tape recorders, charts and even treats, such as Coca-Cola or coffee, can be brought in if desired. Often coffee is available at the prison 24 hours a day in the minimum security unit.

There are as many different half-way houses as there are states to license them. Some are privately owned and some are operated by the government. The one common denominator is reduced security and more normal access to the prisoners. Contact the officer in charge of the program and discuss your offer to conduct a service or bible study. He might refer you to the chaplain who may already have something at the unit that you can participate in, or he may have a suggestion on what you can start in the way of a *new* ministry.

The prisoners in a half-way house are “short-timers” and they will soon be released. They will soon be able to participate in outside church activities and rejoin their family. You are reaching them at a critical time in their prison life. It is a time of decision and your ministry may prevent a new crime from being committed by reaching these people before they are actually free. It is an important ministry.

Here are some suggestions to help you minister in a half-way house:

1. House rule are important and they vary from unit to unit. Know them and observe them.
2. Use a practical approach. Release is near and inmates need some firm answers to big social problems like jobs, driver’s licenses and places to stay. If you can’t furnish these needs try to put them in touch with someone who can. This can be the toughest part of this ministry.
3. Remember the paranoia and the trauma that they have just been through and the effect it is having on them as you work with them in the half-way house.
4. Offer a Bible study or a program of Scripture learning that they can follow now and after their release. This is important.
5. Offer a firm and positive personal testimony from you own experience with Jesus Christ to help strengthen their faith.
6. Encourage them now and after they are released. Uncertainty is their main concern, even if they don’t talk to you about it.
7. Try to put yourself in their place and see how you would respond and how you would feel if you were the one who had gone through all of this.

As the prison population increases dramatically across the United States, more and more half-way houses or minimum security units will be established in small towns all over America. As prison reform limits the number of total prisoners that can be housed in the big state penitentiaries, the local communities will see the non-dangerous prisoners put in a half-way house or local community based correction center. When this happens, even small town Christians will have such facilities nearby to minister in and the responsibility of a prison ministry right at home. Let us pray for this new expanding ministry as prison reform in the United States gives us a new opportunity to testify for our Lord in the half-way house.