

Personal Witnessing In Jails and Prisons

By Allen D. Hanson

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-Author's Update-

As we enter the 21st century, America's prison system has over 1.5 million prisoners in 1,300 big prisons and more than 800,000 people in 8,000 local jails. Effective prison ministry is needed more than ever!

-A.H.

CHAPTER ONE

“REMEMBER THE PRISONERS”

“Remember the prisoners as though in prison with them”
(Hebrews 13:3)

Most Christians associate prison ministry with the high walls and guard towers of a large state or federal institution. This is only one of the many opportunities that exist in bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to those who are locked up. Pastors and lay people alike often do not understand the full extent of this unusual ministry because there are several different ways that we can serve our Lord in this important area of home mission work. We need to pray for prison outreach as we explore each of these opportunities.

We are told in Scripture to “Remember the prisoners as though in prison with them” (Hebrew 13:3). When we try to put ourselves in the place of the inmate or ex-convict or his family, we can better understand their special needs and minister to them effectively. There are six facts that you need to know about the justice system to help you understand prisoners and literally put yourself in their place.

FIRST: The prison system is big! The United States has more people in jail on a per capita basis than any other major nation in the world except Russia and South Africa. There are more than one million men and women in our nation’s 1280 big prisons or penitentiaries. If we add more than 500,000 prisoners in our local jails and city lockups, we have a total of more than one and a half million people in the United States that are incarcerated. We have 40 times as many people in prison on a per capita basis than in West Germany.

This may seem strange for a so-called “free” country, but here in the United States some citizens actually get into trouble because they can’t accurately judge right from wrong. Complete freedom to do as one pleases is more than some people can handle and a few will stray over the legal limits allowed by law. In order to protect our individual liberties, we have an elaborate and expensive procedure for prosecuting our citizens designed to protect their civil right. This is not the case in many foreign countries.

A friend of the author was in West Germany recently where he witnessed a fight on the street. The German police arrived and they simply fired their automatic weapons into the air and the fight was over. There was no trial, jail, bond, plea bargaining, lawyers or anything else. If the fight had not stopped someone might have been shot and killed to put an end to the action and the result would have been pretty much the same.

Very little expense is involved in the West German method of law enforcement, but we can’t accept that type of direct street settlement of crimes here in the United States.

We have an elaborate and sometimes cumbersome justice system that costs a great deal of money to operate, but it is necessary to protect our personal freedoms. When one adds all of the welfare and court costs along with the local, state and federal police together with thousands of jails at all levels, it becomes a very expensive method of law enforcement. When all costs are counted the justice and prison system is the second or third largest industry in America today. Prisons are very big business! It is a very large bureaucracy that doesn’t change easily. Ministering to prisoners must be done within the framework of a big part of our government known as the “correctional” system that is difficult to change.

SECOND: Prisoners are afraid! Everything connected with the justice system has a good deal of trauma or paranoia connected with it. When anyone is arrested, put on trial, and locked up, they go through severe emotional experience. This trauma has a lasting effect on prisoners and their loved ones who often do not understand what is really happening to them. We need to recognize this natural fear

when we deal with people going through the justice system in order to reach them for Jesus Christ. Our best effort to minister in prison will always be affected by this trauma.

THIRD: Inmates are usually men! There are about 40 or 50 men in the penitentiary in the United States for every woman that is locked up. This ratio holds true throughout the entire prison system except for the juvenile system. Women simply do not go to prison for one reason or another. They apparently don't commit as many violent crimes as men and many people feel that some judges give women lighter sentences. In any case, there are very few adult women in the nation's prison system and the prison ministry is almost exclusively a ministry to men.

FOURTH: Serious crimes are involved! Most inmates are in jail for serious violations of the law. Relatives and friends tend to minimize or "play down" the seriousness of the crimes, but chaplains and trained penal officers estimate that 95 percent or more of all convicts are guilty of very serious offenses in spite of what the newspaper or the relatives may say. The author was in jail with a young man who served three years for stealing beer, according to his story. When I inquired further into his crime, he told me that he had stolen an entire truckload of beer. That *was* a serious crime, of course, but not enough to justify three years in jail. So I inquired still further and found out that the young man had used a gun to take the truck away from the driver. He was really guilty of a very serious offense. The young man was in jail for armed robbery in spite of his effort to minimize the seriousness of the crime.

Most men are in jail for very substantial violations of law even though many of these crimes were committed under the influence of drugs or alcohol. The sad part about all of this is that only one criminal in 10 or 20 is caught and punished. Convicts are well aware of these facts. And, right or wrong, they tend to hold these odds against the system when they do get caught. They feel that society has come down hard on them and missed so many others that deserve punishment just as much as they do. There is no easy answer to this problem, but is more difficult to minister to convicts because of this built-in inequity in our justice system.

FIFTH: Prisons don't rehabilitate. When the author arrived at the penitentiary in 1978, the warden spoke to all of us, the new inmates, and said that we were *not* in the penitentiary to be "rehabilitated." He told us that we were in prison to be punished. He announced that the prison had many educational, work, and treatment programs and suggested that we should take advantage of them. He made it very clear, however, that the purpose of our incarceration was "punishment" and nothing else. He was telling it like it is! There is no rehabilitation in any jail. Only the Gospel of Jesus Christ changes men's lives completely. The rest of the men who have a genuine conversion experience and Jesus Christ takes over their hearts and lives are rehabilitated.

Nearly one-third of the prisoners released each year in the United States return to prison within two years or less. It is a well established fact that committed Christians almost never return to prison for any reason. This is a reality that makes all your efforts to reach prisoners with the Gospel of Jesus Christ worth all the time and energy that you spend on it.

SIXTH: The prison ministry begins with basics! Few prisoners have any amount of religious training and they simply do not understand the theological and denominational differences. Most prisoners will respond negatively to theological arguments, so our approach inside the prison wall will be most effective if we emphasize those central truths which evangelical churches hold in common. Chaplains are seldom identified with sponsoring church groups while inside the jail. This allows the Gospel of Jesus Christ to gain a hearing even from those who otherwise might be put off by the denominational identity of the witness. Obviously where a continuing witness to an individual is possible, the full Scriptural message may be shared, including our distinctive Lutheran doctrines.

A prison sentence can be an extremely unpleasant experience and we need to try to understand the actual trauma that prisoners go through. When we "put ourselves in their place" we can better see the opportunity in the prison ministry. Each of the six major factors discussed here is an important part of the background we need to know to take advantage of this opportunity.

CHAPTER TWO

WILL YOUR CHILD EVER GO TO PRISON

“Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6)

Every parent probably thinks about the possibility that his or her child will grow up and go to prison some day. It is a very real possibility. Mass media and the expanding prison system have made parents aware of the risks involved for every child in this age of drugs and juvenile delinquency. It is relatively easy today to run afoul of the law. Well-meaning parents can bury the frustration they feel in age-old clichés and structured discipline without regard for the outcome or the end product. They try to do the “right thing” but they really don’t know how to do it.

A quick evaluation of most prison files will reveal one overriding consideration. Almost all convicts have had some kind of legal discipline trouble as a juvenile. When it happens very few parents expect it to go any further, and when it does develop into serious trouble they have difficulty believing it until it results in a penitentiary term. Somewhere in the makeup or training of the youngster were the seeds for further discipline problems after the initial brush with the law as a child. The sad part about this entire situation is the truth that almost every social factor affecting children’s behavior can be related to some extent to relationships with their parents.

Let’s look at something you may have never considered. The *strong-willed child* or the young person who is prone to *excess* is often a likely candidate for a prison cell. It’s not necessarily the kid from the wrong side of the tracks or the local goofball. He may be arrested, but he will probably complete a supervised probation. It is the young man prone to generally overdoing in everything that can result in excess drugs, alcohol, money, and violence (see Chapter Five). Crime is related to these excesses which can lead to a prison term. Following are seven points that parents should consider in their concern to avoid juvenile and adult prison problems:

1. Radiate the love of Jesus Christ in your life and marriage. Provide a secure and peaceful home in which your child can grow up, and learn to know the Lord.
2. Control printed material, television, associations and associates until the child is old enough to judge right from wrong under your guidance.
3. Teach the child respect for legal and lawful authority.
4. Give the child what it needs and not what it wants. A conservative lifestyle and the use of economic common sense will do much to control the impulse to go to excess.
5. Deal with the excessively stubborn and strong-willed child as early in life as possible. Seek professional help at the age of two or three years if necessary. You may save your child a lifetime of trouble and a prison education.
6. Radiate a positive attitude toward life and teach your child the same virtue.
7. Instill in your child a deep religious commitment through training and knowledge of our Lord and Savior. A child’s personal relationship with Jesus Christ is the only hope of your success as a parent which can lessen much of the chance that your child will ever see the inside of a prison as an inmate.

Sometimes there is no logical reason why someone will commit a capital crime. Many prison terms have been started by mixing legal prescription drugs and alcohol. Others result from stormy marriages or ill-considered responses to significant problems such as marital infidelity or a triangle affair. But behind it all is often a rebellious will and a weak religious faith. Parents do have a good deal of control over tomorrow’s prison inmate population and again Jesus Christ is the answer to keeping your child out of prison.

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.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE TRAUMA OF ARREST AND PROSECUTION

Very little has been written about the trauma or fear connected with arrest, prosecution and incarceration as it concerns the prison ministry. The general public thinks that this fear is what the criminal deserves for committing the crime. The police use this fear and uncertainty to obtain information and confessions. The lawyers exploit this fear in prisoners to expedite due process of law and speed up plea bargaining. The men and women who minister in prison need to understand this fear or trauma to properly approach their prospect with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is an awesome experience to be arrested, jailed and put on trial. No one can adequately explain what it is like to be detained without going through the experience. The total change and interruption of the regular daily schedule, plus the uncertainty surrounding a sudden arrest will jolt almost anyone into a traumatic state. The lack of a foreseeable future is very frustrating. All of this contributes to the paranoia that will last a long time after the new inmate is jailed and later released back into society.

When the police arrest a person there is usually no announcement or warning as one or two squad cars converge and the handcuffs are applied and locked. Arresting officers use handcuffs for all types of crimes such as murder, rape, armed robbery and the simplest property offenses, such as bad checks, petty theft or income tax evasion. Police officers don't usually play "Mr. Nice Guy" at the time of the initial arrest and transportation to the local jail. They do their job according to set procedures.

The suspect may then be charged with several crimes (or different charges for the same event) to give the prosecutor a chance to make a deal with him or "plea bargain." If the new suspect can work out a deal to avoid a trial he will start his prison sentence immediately, or he could face several months of traumatic wait and a jury trial. In any case, the prison sentence he is facing will almost certainly begin soon. A prison experience can be a terrible thing and a traumatic event as you take up your new life in the state or federal penitentiary. It is an unforgettable day when you walk out in the yard of a major United States prison for the first time as a brand new inmate. You suddenly realize that you are a prisoner in one of the nation's penal institutions and your prison sentence is very much for real.

As you serve your time and wait for the parole board to act on your case, you go through the uncertainty of a release date. The unstable nature of many of the inmates has its effect on you as you witness violence, or experience threats that keep you constantly on guard for your own personal safety. All of these feelings slowly generate an attitude about the entire prison experience. When the day comes to walk out the front door of the prison and you *try* to start your life over, emotionally you are not the same person. You have had a terrifying experience and you will be a little different from that day on for the rest of your life.

Our job as witnesses for Jesus Christ in prison is to anticipate this fear at every stage of incarceration and adjust our ministry to this paranoia. How can we do this? There are two ways.

First: Be aware of the trauma and adjust your Christian message to it. You may not need to preach much "law" inside the prison wall. The prisoner may well be aware that he has broken the commandments and does *need* the *Gospel* of Jesus Christ. The trauma of arrest and jail will actually help prepare many to receive it. Men who could not be reached outside the prison wall may often have an open mind and heart for the Gospel message after they are locked up. Use your knowledge of this to deliver a better witness and be more effective ministering in prison.

One problem may be that the inmate realizes that he is in trouble with society, does not understand that he is in trouble also with God, not just because of the crime which caused him to be locked up but because of unbelief and lovelessness and all kinds of other wrongs. From God's law he needs to learn the full extent of his problem. Because of his lack of religious training, he may have little awareness of this problem.

Second: Consider the conduct of the inmate and particularly the ex-offender as he is affected by this terror. Actually observe him under the influence of this fear and paranoia. It will help you understand the inmates regular conversation and personal conduct. Most inmates are not dangerous but they often act defensively, by our way of thinking, outside the wall (or “on the street,” as they say in prison). This can only be explained by taking into account the paranoia that goes along with a jail sentence. Men and women who go into prison to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ must realize this natural reaction, in each inmate, as part of their ministry and adjust to it. It will work for you if you consider the consequences of this fear.

Understanding the trauma of arrest, prosecution and incarceration is important to your success as an evangelist; but more important is the fact that we understand our subject. This paranoia gains strength the longer the inmate is locked up and it lessens with each passing month after his release from jail.

It is easy to recognize this fear if you are aware of it. This explains much of the strange conduct often associated with convicts or ex-offenders. There are many factors involved in locking people up in our society today and this is one of the hidden costs that is not always counted. There is little connection between public safety and this paranoia, but understanding this obstacle will make you a much more effective missionary in prison.

May the Lord help us overcome this special problem as we minister in prisons and jails.

CHAPTER FIVE

PROFILE OF A PRISONER

Many well-meaning Christians put all inmates into one general category that includes dirt, drugs, and derogatory language. The television version of “Rocky the Convict” with his ball and chain hardly fits today’s prison population. The modern day inmate is under 28 years old, chemically dependent (drugs or alcohol), and a grade school drop-out. While he is above normal in intelligence, he is way below average in grade level. He has probably gone to school (on the average) through the ninth grade, but he will test out at the seventh or eighth grade level. He usually has no formal church training and has not been baptized. He may come from a broken home and was probably abused to some extent as a child. He is serving his first prison term, although he has probably been arrested before as a juvenile at least once.

His prison sentence (the one he will really serve) is about 18 months to 24 months of actual jail time and he probably will *not* come back into the prison system again after he gets out. If he does repeat and comes back to prison, it is likely that he will do so within two years after his release. About one-third of the first offenders will actually come back although some of them may return several times. Other than this description of a typical average inmate, the prison system holds all kinds of people from the 70-year-old rapist and the New York stock broker to the small town banker and the local drug pusher at the area high school. There is one thing about almost all offenders that few people consider. They are often frustrated *doers* or *achievers*.

The author of this book led a Bible study in one of the nation’s big prisons and helped conduct a round robin of sharing individual ideas and thoughts. Inasmuch as I was the leader, I needed to say something meaningful to the group, so I carefully considered each man as he presented his thoughts to the group. When it was my turn to share, I simply said that “all of us are here in this prison today (including myself as an ex-offender) because of some excess in our life; excess drugs, excess alcohol, excess sex, excess money in my case, excess violence or other overdoing.”

The room became very silent as a young inmate stood up and glared at me and said, “I’m glad you said that.” He was realizing for the first time in his life why he was really locked up at this prison. It was the tremendous drive or tendency to go to “excess” that finally resulted in a crime worthy of a jail sentence. The local bum in your home town will probably be arrested once or twice and serve out his probation as near the legal line as he can; but it is the intelligent “strong-willed” person who goes to extremes in everything he does, who will finally violate the law with a felony that society cannot overlook. Everything he does is done so hard or done to excess.

Bringing Christ into a life like this provides the person with resources to struggle successfully against these evil tendencies and may result in dramatic deliverance. Christ is the whole source of a new life and victory over excess of any type, both inside and outside the prison wall.

Special mention needs to be made about inmates’ reading skills and ability. Inmates usually cannot study and comprehend the regular Christian material that we give them as part of our ministry. This doesn’t mean that we should not give them what we have, but we need to look for simple reading material that they can understand.

Modern language (easy to read) Bibles, in large print type, are often needed along with Bible studies that are designed for the junior high level. These go a long way in compensating for inmate reading problems. Considerable work has been done in this area of the prison ministry during the past few years. Most major prison ministries in the United States now have simple source material available that inmates can read and understand. Simplified Scripture and Bible studies with a lower vocabulary word count can be obtained through these national prison ministries by writing to them with specific information on the grade level you need.

When you minister in prison you will find many inmates who could easily be your dad or son if one serious major event (of excess) had not occurred to change their lives to a prison cell for many years. One capital crime is one too many. A chaplain the author worked with in a large Midwest prison looked out over dozens of men in the prison yard one day and said, "There, but by the grace of God, am I." He knew just as the author does that there is a fine line between those who are in and those who are out of the prison system. That's the strange truth about incarceration.

CHAPTER SIX

MINISTERING IN THE PENITENTIARY

One of the most important ministries in our country is the opportunity to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to men and women in large state federal prisons. Inmates in these institutions have been convicted of serious crimes and desperately need your Christian love and concern. While the high walls and guard towers of these large prisons scare many well-meaning Christians away, few ministries offer a greater challenge for dedicated Christians than this one.

The key to the prison ministry is prayer and the prison chaplain. It is important to pray daily for prisoners and pray before each prison visit. It is also important to utilize the prison chaplain and his office as a prison staff officer. He can help you direct your evangelistic effort to achieve the maximum possible results within the social culture and security restrictions of a large penitentiary.

Christians who accept the challenge to minister in a big prison or penitentiary need to know *three* basic facts about prisons and the opportunity to carry the Gospel of Jesus Christ past the front door (or the control center) of a major penal institution.

FIRST: All types of “security levels” from solitary confinement to trustee status exist at most large state and federal institutions. You must know the rules and they vary from state to state and from institution to institution. What’s “minimum” security in Nebraska can be “medium” security in Minnesota. You must know the institution and how to gain access or you simply will not get in to minister. You must seek out this information on each prison you want to enter. It is most likely that an officer of the institution *must* be present at the Bible study or church service and the chaplain must furnish or arrange for this guard status.

Sometimes Christian officers will volunteer to serve as a “guide” for outside groups and you can start a Bible study or church service with this dedicated Christian officer as your required guard. In any case, the entire service must be cleared with the chaplain and planned well ahead of time. Don’t assume anything about “security” except that it will vary from prison to prison and you will get into each prison in a little different manner. The chaplain is the final link to the system and you must plan your activities with him.

SECOND: Newcomers to the prison ministry tend to be *afraid* and this is natural, but unwarranted. The visiting room and chapel are the safest places in the entire prison. God’s people who bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ enjoy a special status among inmates and guards alike. Even non-Christian inmates respect the men and women who bring in Christian testimony and they consider the place of worship as “holy” and untouchable.

During a recent riot at the St. Louis City jail (an institution of several hundred inmates) the religious statues were left untouched when everything else was destroyed. Do not be afraid to go and do our Lord’s work. His shield of protection will go with you as you proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

THIRD: Christians wonder what to say to “tough” criminals and the answer is quite simple. Radiate the love of Jesus Christ in your *own* life and talk about your faith in direct and positive terms. The surroundings eliminate much of the usual need for small talk and you can witness face-to-face on equal terms. Tell him about Jesus Christ and explain the way of salvation. (See pages 43-45.) Any small talk should center around the reason for your visit, which is to come and see him (the inmate) and tell him about Christ.

The most effective person that you can bring into the prison with you to witness is a Christian ex-convict. If he is a Christian ex-offender experienced in conducting prison services you can have a tremendous meeting as he “lays it on the line” in tough prison language and tells it like it is! If you have a chance to go into a big prison and attend a large service with men like Al Hanson (the author), Jim Tucker, Jerry Graham, George Meyer, Ted Jefferson, or any other ex-convict who is an experienced

preacher inside a big prison, you will have a great service and you will see an effective prison ministry in action. Many are brought to saving faith as the Holy Spirit moves throughout a big prison or penitentiary during special services like this.

In order to *minister* in prison you must *visit* in prison. Our Lord regards visiting in prison so highly that we are told in Matthew 25:40 that it is the same as if we had visited our Savior personally. Jesus puts the same emphasis on prison visitations as He does on feeding the hungry, clothing the needy, and visiting the sick. We need to *visit* in prison to bring the Gospel to men and women behind the walls of a big penitentiary or prison. There are three ways to visit in prison.

FIRST: You can write letters and correspond with prisoners. You should get the name and address of an inmate from the chaplain at any large prison or from an established prison service organization. As I mentioned in the preceding chapter, convicts are above average in intelligence but well below average in grade level and many prisoners have a limited letter writing ability. You don't need to leave your home to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to prisoners by mail.

SECOND: Recent court orders have offered telephone usage to almost all prisoners and you can talk to an inmate via telephone if you are willing to accept the phone charges. Many prisoners have NO one else to call and they would welcome the opportunity to visit with you by telephone. Make the initial contact through a prison chaplain or an established prison service organization, and use the personal contact to testify to your faith in our Lord and Savior. The prisoner can respond to you and ask questions in a telephone conversation.

THIRD: Go to the penitentiary and visit in person. If you don't know someone that you can visit in person, then you should contact a prison service organization or the prison chaplain and tell them as much about yourself as you can so they can properly match you to an inmate for visiting. The chaplain can arrange your first personal religious visit with a specific inmate and explain how to meet the prison's security requirements for additional visits. You may want to become a part of an inmate's permanent visitors list.

You can also join a religious group already going into the prison on a regular basis to help them with their established ministry. It will help you get on-the-job training. Eventually you could organize your own religious group meeting inside the prison after you learn the special needs of this unusual ministry. As you visit in prison on a one-to-one basis (or with a group) keep in mind that you are in a different environment and culture. The inmate is subject to different social pressures and security regulations than we are outside the prison wall. The following guidelines will help you conduct your visit to the penitentiary in the best possible manner.

TWENTY DO'S AND DON'T FOR VISITING IN PRISON

DO visit a prisoner somewhere soon. It will do you as much good as it does him.

DON'T be afraid. You are not in danger when you visit in prison.

DO dress casually. Avoid flashy clothing.

DON'T go without making an advance contact with authorities. If you don't make advance arrangements you will probably be turned away.

DO be there early. Sometimes prison security officials need extra time to process your visit.

DON'T take camera or tape recorder to the prison. There are not usually allowed inside.

DO smile. It's contagious even in prison.

DON'T give the prisoner anything unless you check first with the authorities. Contraband may be suspected if you do.

DO tell the prisoner how good he looks. Self-respect is important, especially in prison.

DON'T plan to stay more than about one hour unless you have come a long way. Individual conversation wears thin after that time even among people who know each other well.

DO talk about a bright future. He will probably do very well when he is released, but he is unsure of himself right now.

DON'T bring up family problems. If the prisoner wants to talk about them, you can follow his lead.

DO tell the prisoner about Jesus. He will be more receptive to your testimony than you might think.

DON'T talk about the prisoner's criminal case. He would probably like to forget it just as you should.

DO tell him you care. This has special meaning to someone in prison.

DON'T compliment any part of the prison system. This is a fundamental rule because prisoners do not appreciate their incarceration.

DO tell the prisoner when you will be back to visit again. He will look forward to it.

DON'T forget to pray daily for the prisoner. Pray for their safety and pray for their salvation.

DO encourage others to visit in prison. Tell them how well it went for you.

DON'T forget to contribute to a prison ministry. The need is great in all prison ministry agencies.

Your ministry in a large penitentiary is one of the great mission opportunities still available to Christians without leaving your home country. It is like a foreign mission field with a different culture and very special entrance requirements due to security regulations. You face many of the same problems that foreign missionaries experience as you minister to inmates in a large prison or penitentiary. It is your chance to serve the Lord in a very unique way.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

THE CHRISTIAN CONVICT

The convict who receives Christ as his personal Savior and leads a Christian life behind bars is a changed man indeed. Although still weak and sinful, he ordinarily shows marked improvement in his life and attitude. He begins to clean up his language and it becomes different from the rest of the prisoners. He tries to accept the circumstances under which he is living. He learns to accept his incarceration and is content in spite of his circumstances. While all of his spiritual, personal and legal problems are not solved by any means, he is “a new creature” in the Lord. There is nothing that will make prison life more bearable than the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and regular association with fellow Christians in the prison environment. This is the real key to surviving the prison experience. The Christian convict radiates Christ Jesus and identifies with Him.

In any prison there are factions or interest groups that cater to each other. They are the prison peer groups or inmate organizations allowed within the prison walls. Athletes, motorcycle enthusiasts, culture groups, singers, musicians, chess players, painters and scholars all seek each other out and associate or organize. The Christian also has his own peer group of other Christians that he associates with and they gather for the authorized Christian church services or Bible studies inside the prison wall. They sometimes get a reputation for getting out of jail faster than the other inmates or “riding religion out of the prison.” This is not really true except that Christians have more reason and motive for not doing the things that get them in trouble in the prison (like drugs or violence).

Christians acquire less “write-ups,” demerits or derogatory prison records that prevent them from becoming eligible for Department of Corrections programs, such as transfer to a halfway house or minimum-security unit. Often they actually leave the main prison or close custody units and cell blocks before other men with the same sentence because they simply don’t mess up and break the rules. Once a man “gets religion,” as the non-Christian convicts say, even the guards and staff can tell the difference. One tough prison warden was overheard to say, “I don’t know what they (the Christians) have got, but whatever it is, we need more of it.”

The inmate who knows Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord attends church and Bible study. In work units or prisons with inmate jobs available, the Christian convict may apply for an 8 to 5 job that allows him to attend *all* the scheduled off-hours church services possible. The author did this during his nine month sentence at Minnesota State Prison. The Christian inmate needs the fellowship with other believers. He should look for opportunities to testify and witness and as much as possible radiate the peace he has in his Lord as he keeps the disciplined routine of the prison schedule.

The Christian inmate may prepare himself for release someday (even if it is many years away) by regular physical exercise and daily Bible study. He can pray and read his Bible during the prison counts or lockups as he uses his day to the best advantage. This is how the Christian convict spends his time when he is not working on his prison job or attending church services. He may write letters to Christian friends outside the wall. He can always enroll in a Bible study course, either inside the prison or by mail. He may also work part time or full time for the chaplain or as an outside prison volunteer. Burying himself in Christian activities prepares his mind and body for eventual release, and helps him serve his sentence. He “does his own time” in prison as required by the inmate code. When the lockup or prison shakedown inspections come, he prays. He reads. He talks to his “celly” (cell mate) who may or may not be a Christian and he prepares himself for his final day in prison; his day of release.

Satan still is a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, and he has some successes with inmates who confess Christ. Prison walls do not change the fact that there is weak faith and misguided faith and lost faith. But the Christian inmate can be a beautiful man who is worth all the evangelistic effort we put into the prison ministry to reach him.

The author knew a Christian prison volunteer in Missouri who told outsiders that he had more Christian friends inside the wall of a big prison than he had on the outside, and he really meant it. He was going into the prison two nights a week to minister and testify and he was associating with some of God's finest people in one of America's big penitentiaries. His friends inside the wall were some of our nation's finest Christians and he was enjoying their fellowship.

If you have never been in a big prison to meet good Christian inmates, you are missing an opportunity to fellowship. Go into prison and meet them. You will be surprised. The sad part of the penal system is that a sincere Christian will probably never commit another crime and they represent no further threat to society; but they may have many years of prison time to serve for something they did before they became a Christian.

Is it safe to be a Christian in prison and profess your faith in Jesus Christ? Oh! Yes! It is the only way to be in prison, if you must be there at all. Christians in jail universally feel that they have a "shield of protection" as they praise God and testify to His holy name. Christian inmates tell one story after another about experiences they have had and how they personally have been protected and uplifted in a difficult prison situation. Prisons are dangerous places indeed because some unstable men reside there. But Christians seem to always come through their prison experience unharmed because of the unique protection that our Lord provides. Christians need not fear the danger and uncertainty of prisons either as a convict or an outsider going in to minister, because our God will protect His people. The author can personally testify to this marvelous and wonderful truth. Let us praise His holy name.

CHAPTER EIGHT

PRISON WIDOW

Loneliness, frustration and guilt are the emotional feelings of the wife that waits outside the prison wall for her husband's release. She hasn't committed any crime, but she has gone through all of the arrest and trial procedures with her husband. Now she waits outside the prison wall while he serves his sentence. An important part of herself is locked up in that prison cell and her life will not be normal until her husband is released.

Besides being sole parent to the children, she is repairman, grocery buyer, taxi driver, breadwinner, chief cook and accountant for the family that is left behind. She visits at the prison and the welfare office on a regular basis and buries her identity elsewhere to hide her shame. She is lonely and often bitter because she has been left alone to wait for a man that she loves who may just commit another felony when he is finally released. She is afraid that he will go back to jail again and leave her alone once more. Welfare doesn't provide enough food and shelter so she tries to earn a little more money by working as much as possible, as she tries to hide the true circumstances surrounding her life.

The prisoner's wife really wants to wait for her man, but often she does not. Figures at one Midwest state penitentiary show that 70 percent of all marriages break up during the first year of incarceration. Nearly all spouses, who didn't divorce their mates who are locked up inside the prison wall, had some sexual relations outside of marriage if the prison sentence and separation lasted more than one year. These are hard facts not often faced by prison ministry volunteers. They do not reflect as much on the wives, who didn't survive the wait, as the justice system that created a prison widow with a living husband that she cannot live with for several months or years.

Inmates learn these truths shortly after they arrive in prison and some men will encourage their wives to seek an outside relationship with someone that they know and trust, who does not represent a real threat to their marriage. In other words, they approve (as long as they can't be there personally) of someone who will not represent permanent competition. No single prison problem is less understood. Few couples who survive the prison experience will ever talk about this dilemma. Experienced prison chaplains know that separation of married couples is one of the most complex problems facing the prison ministry today. Conjugal visits have greatly relieved the problem in prisons such as Attica, New York and Walla Walla, Washington; but many states have failed to deal with this situation and the social nightmare that it creates.

What is the result? Besides an unstable marriage, there is a lifetime scar on the relationship that couples often blame on the justice system. Right or wrong they blame the justice system and not themselves. There is no easy answer, but as we minister in the prison environment we must always be aware of the possibility of infidelity, which is seldom discussed or talked about. It creates an atmosphere that will have an effect on your ministry both to the inmate inside the wall and his spouse on the outside. Prayer works wonders, but there is also a great need for the love and companionship of the church to the family during this difficult period. The wife who waits for her husband needs enough material help to make welfare reach. She needs social acceptance by the church to provide love and companionship while she waits. The church can be a tremendous help by just being there to share the hurt and to care.

Some fine young wives do wait and survive the prolonged prison sentence. If they can do this, their marriage may actually be strengthened. The men and women who minister in prison need to be aware of the serious problem created by separating married couples so they can properly minister to both the inmate in prison and the family that waits outside the wall. Besides acceptance, love and a normal Christian lifestyle, the prison widow needs some financial assistance in the form of car repair or moving help, as well as children's clothes and basic food if the welfare check doesn't fully reach. Above all, she needs the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ in her life. She is probably going to be more receptive than she has ever been before because of her current dilemma.

There are many fine churches that have helped prisoners' families through difficult periods of imprisonment. They make the future of that Christian family a distinct possibility after the inmate is released from jail. May God bless them all.

CHAPTER NINE

THE HALF-WAY HOUSE

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.

CHAPTER TEN

MINISTERING TO THE PRISONER'S FAMILY

Whenever someone is sent to prison, there is almost always a family of some kind that is left behind to wait. It may be a wife, parents, brother, sister, almost any close friend or relative that cares about the new inmate. These people represent an unusual opportunity for dedicated Christians to minister to the family of a prisoner while he is in jail. There is probably no better time in the life of the prisoner's family to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to these relatives than during this critical period. They really need our love and concern. These people represent an excellent opportunity for evangelism and Christian outreach and they will be much more receptive to the gospel than usual.

Almost every social ministry, as outlined in Matthew 25: 31-40, applies to the family of prisoners. An entire book could be written on the requirements of these hurting people and our opportunity to serve our Lord personally by helping them with their daily needs. If these needs can be met, then renewed faith in Jesus Christ can overcome the heartache and traumatic effects of waiting for a loved one who is in prison. The family didn't commit the crime, but they are actually serving the time emotionally with the inmate that they love. Things won't get back to normal in their life until their loved one is released from prison and that may be many years away. It doesn't matter if the inmate deserved everything he got from the judge—things won't be right for the family until the inmate is released. They need the love of fellow Christians and the gospel of Jesus Christ to fill the void in their lives.

There are four things that you should remember as you minister to the family of a prisoner.

FIRST: Many of the necessities of daily life are furnished by welfare for needy dependent family members of any inmate. This is part of the high cost of incarceration in our society today. As Christians, we can help with the special needs of the prisoner's family like moving, automobile repair, prison transportation, and by checking that the daily necessities of life such as food, clothing and housing are actually furnished by welfare.

SECOND: The trauma and emotional effects of arrest, trial and incarceration are shared by the inmate's family and friends. They go through the strain of lockup and the brutal reality of the justice system with their loved one. Although they may not show it, they will be under this strain when you contact them.

THIRD: Relatives feel "locked-up" with their loved one who is in prison and they will continue to have this feeling to some degree until that person is released from jail. There is no way that anyone can adequately explain what it is like to have a loved one in prison without going through that experience personally. We must try to put ourselves in their place and try to understand how they must feel so that we can successfully minister to a prisoner's family.

FOURTH: It is well to remember that marriages are under a terrible strain at this time due to the total separation of both marriage partners. Survival of the marriage may depend on your Christian understanding and concern. If the prisoner can come home to a loving and waiting family, he has a much greater chance of avoiding crime and staying out of prison in the future.

The family of the prison inmate is deeply concerned about the absence and lock-up of their loved one. There are 10 things that you can do to ease the terrible burden they carry and deliver the message of salvation at the same time.

1. Pray for the prisoner and pray for his family. Nothing is more important than prayer!
2. Specifically, testify to the prisoner's family about your personal faith in Christ Jesus and invite them to share it.
3. Welcome them into your church without condemning them for what their loved one may have done.

4. Visit the inmate at the prison and tell the relatives how well the visit went for you.
5. Include the prisoner's family in community and church affairs to help them lead a normal life while they wait.
6. Assist the prisoner's family with special needs as moving or car repair.
7. Help the family arrange transportation to the jail for regular prison visits.
8. Keep yourself fully informed by subscribing to the prison newspaper or joining an established prison service organization so you can better understand the family's needs.
9. Teach others about the special requirements of a prisoner's family and invite them to help.
10. "Remember the prisoners as though in prison with them" (Hebrews 13:3). Also, remember the prisoner's family and try to understand how they feel.

Churches or civic organizations in large metropolitan areas can consider operating a bus between the population center and the state penal institution. A modest fee can be charged to those who can afford it and the transportation can be given to those who can't pay. A simple Christian ministry can be conducted during the bus trip enroute to the prison by dedicated Christians who ride along.

There is nothing that will benefit an inmate more after his release than a waiting Christian family that is ready to take him back and help him start his life over again. You can accomplish a dual purpose by bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the prisoner's family and helping the inmate readjust to society when you minister to the family of someone in prison.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

PAROLE AND FINAL DISCHARGE

Most people who visit in prison do not understand the meaning of parole and probation, but there is an important difference. Probation is really a *stayed* prison sentence. If the convict under a prison sentence does certain things as prescribed by the court such as obey the law in the future and make restitution for a specified period of time, he will never actually have to go to jail.

Many inmates that you will minister to in prison are there because they “failed” probation. Their prison sentence is no longer “stayed” and they are now in jail to serve their actual prison sentence. There is usually no daily credit for time served in probation and the full sentence is ahead of them starting from day number one. Men who have gone through this and failed probation are also afraid they will “fail” parole.

Parole status is prison time, so to speak. Some inmates call it “easy prison time,” but not all prisoners regard it that way. Inmates do not trust the system and they simply do not want to serve time on parole. This feeling is so intense in many prisoners that they will actually sit in prison a year or two longer to avoid any parole time. They simply do *not* trust themselves or their ability to serve parole time successfully. Each day served on parole is one day of prison time and usually counts (in most states) as such. If the parole is violated the inmate is returned to jail, but the “clock is still running,” as prisoners say, and the original sentence is reduced by all of the time served including the parole time that was successful.

It is important to know this because your prisoner is thinking about these things and your approach to him has to reach him through the system that controls him. His thinking is affected by probation, probation violation, incarceration and eventual parole plus the possibility of a parole failure. If you consider this fact with the uncertainty for the future that he has, you actually have the formula for failure on the street unless he has Jesus Christ in his life.

There are *two* important facts about parole and release that every prison minister should know.

FIRST: There is no day that is lower in your life than the day that you go to jail and no day that is more joyous or happier than the one when you get out of prison. Take it from the author of this book who is an ex-offender.

SECOND: Few inmates ever go back to jail if they know Jesus Christ as their Savior. This is a fact! In one prison after another across the United States, the author finds that sincere adult Christians have a nearly perfect record for staying out of jail. This is your number one selling point (after salvation) as a reason for believing in Christ. Inmates are traditionally afraid of release although they may not say so, but will accept release and successfully complete parole if they are Christians.

Your ministry in prison will have a three-fold result. It will save a soul. It will change a lifestyle inside and outside the prison wall. It will save your state or federal government a lot of money for future imprisonment. This is how important your work as a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ can be inside the prison walls.

Be aware of the trauma of arrest, incarceration, the joy of release as well as the uncertainty of parole from the point of view of an inmate, and minister to him with confidence and love. After all, our Lord died that we might live for Him—even on parole!

CHAPTER TWELVE

MINISTERING TO THE EX-OFFENDER

A prison term can be a terrible thing and ex-offenders have had a traumatic experience. They tend to distrust the justice system and society in general. They need our acceptance and understanding. Their background and prison sentence often leaves a deep scar on their emotional make-up. Your ministry and the love of Jesus Christ can help them overcome the trauma and paranoia caused by being locked up in prison. If they are new Christians, we need to accept them into our churches and realize that their prison sentence may influence their attitude and actions for sometime to come. They need our acceptance, tolerance and prayers.

One of the most difficult tasks that any Christian can face today is ministering to an ex-offender. The social, educational and personal experience background of the ex-convict is so different that basic understanding and communications are hard to achieve. Both pastors and laymen often experience difficulty in relating to ex-convicts and in delivering their divine message without sounding like a New Testament Pharisee. Even the most effective evangelists may not succeed in reaching these individuals for Christ.

Ministering to an ex-offender is much the same as ministering to a recovering alcoholic. Often the two are one and the same person. Many times an offender is caught and prosecuted because his drug or alcohol problem slowed his judgment or reaction time. Maybe he got the “nerve” to go ahead with a particular crime while under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Often we are ministering to a combination recovering alcoholic and ex-convict.

It is a common mistake to assume that all criminals are repeaters, just as it is an error to assume that alcoholics cannot recover. Figures show that nearly two-thirds of all convicts released from the prison system in the United States never return to jail.

While there is no accurate national population census on ex-convicts, it is reliably estimated that there are over 10 million ex-offenders in America today who are quietly forgetting the past and hoping no one will remember or ever find out. It is easy to see how more than 500,000 men and women in our prisons and local jails can quickly multiply into millions of ex-offenders. More than half of them finish their sentences and are released back into society each year and two-thirds of them never go back to any jail in the future.

The important thing about an ex-convict is that he wants to forget. He firmly believes he has paid his debt to society and he doesn't need to be reminded of his past failure. If we can honestly treat him as “paid in full” in the eyes of the law, we can conduct a much more successful ministry. Most ex-convicts never talk about their experiences nor advertise their status as such. They are in your neighborhood, factory, church or civic group and you simply don't know about it. They seldom discuss their past life with anyone. These ex-offenders present a distinct and different challenge for your evangelistic effort.

The average American citizen does not realize the basic problems that most ex-convicts face in everyday life. Normally they cannot make even small credit purchases without help from a co-signer or guarantor. Insurance companies sometimes hesitate to issue any type of liability insurance to them because they feel that an ex-convict does not make a “good witness” in court in future litigation resulting from the policy coverage.

Many times the ex-convict faces family and financial problems as a result of his prosecution and incarceration. He knows he may never be able to win a criminal trial again even if he is innocent because most juries will not consider him to be a good and creditable witness and accept his testimony in self-defense. He is forever on guard against the blunt and outspoken citizen who wants to verbally put him down because of his criminal record and he tries to avoid these obvious confrontations.

It takes an ex-convict at least one year after he is released to start thinking normally. Some prisoners, who have been locked up for several years, need three years or more to adjust their thinking

to the outside. Prison life requires special defensive thinking a self-preservation or loner attitudes that fit into the inmate culture of a penitentiary. After you have adjusted to life inside the prison wall, it takes time to readjust to the outside society.

By outward appearance the ex-offender is normal and he obeys the law as he sets an acceptable daily schedule for himself, but the inner person is still emotionally tuned to prison life. The author is an ex-convict and can personally relate to these problems and needs. No one can ever adequately explain what it is like to be locked up month after month and year after year! You must try to understand incarceration to minister to the ex-offender.

There are three distinct areas that affect the attitude of the ex-convict toward your ministry:

FIRST: He lacks self-respect that obviously comes from being locked up in a social system that attaches a certain stigma to imprisonment.

SECOND: He has a mistrust for society that comes from watching a system come down hard on him, while missing many others who deserve punishment just as much as he does. He has viewed the many others who deserve punishment just as much as he does. He has viewed the many inequities in the justice system over the years and is afraid it will fail again for him.

THIRD: He usually lacks a secondary education to communicate with you and digest what you have to say. He also may not be able to read the regular Christian literature that you use in your ministry. Ex-convicts are well above the national average in basic intelligence, but are well below average in literacy and grade level. As such, they present a good profile as a potential learning group but are not easily trainable because of the lack of self-respect, mistrust for society in general, and a basic lack of reading ability.

If the ex-offender is still married he may need many months to readjust to his wife, who has become accustomed to living alone. He may also need to overlook an affair that his wife may have had because of the lonely months or years without her husband. As you minister to this ex-offender you can only guess that this may be the case. Experienced prison counselors will tell you that such an arrangement by the wife is more common if the husband's incarceration lasts more than one year.

The ex-offender may be concealing more than marital infidelity, also. He may know of hideous crimes that are not yet solved or ones that were planned while he was in jail. He may have committed other crimes that have not caught up with him yet and lives in the uncertainty of the situation until the statute of limitations expires on the event, which may be several years away. Sometimes the statutes never expire on a specific event. All these things plague an ex-offender along with the trauma of his arrest and incarceration.

This is the reason that the ex-offender may not wish to take up normal church activities during the first few weeks of freedom. He may shy away from social events or even skip church services once in awhile even if he is a Christian. He is apt to be reclusive for a period of time as he eventually leaves the prison cell and gets adjusted to his new life outside the prison wall. The odds against us are great as we try to minister to these hard-to-reach people. Therefore an effective outreach must circumvent these difficulties and deal effectively with the real problems. A complete grasp and understanding of his prison lifestyle and thinking are important. You face many of the same problems that a foreign missionary has in getting to know your subject.

Here are the 10 most important things that you need to do to effectively minister to the ex-offender:

1. Pray for the ex-offender and pray for his family. Don't try this complicated ministry without prayer!
2. Build confidence through compassion and use a straight forward approach in ministering to him. Be aware of the fact that he may regard you as part of the "system" that went wrong with him.
3. Don't compliment the justice system because he doesn't completely trust it. You can talk about it if you want to, but be objective and open to his side of the story.
4. Don't discuss his criminal case because he would like to forget it and you should too. Convicts have a saying in prison, "Get off my case" which means leave me alone, in the legal sense.

5. Give him time to adjust to his new life on the outside. A prison experience can be a terrible thing and each passing month helps him forget about it more and more. He wants and needs to forget.
6. Give him your personal testimony about your faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Don't be embarrassed! He comes out of a blunt prison society and expects you to share your personal faith. Deep down inside he knows that God is very real from experiences he has had inside the prison.
7. Be satisfied with a good meeting and don't expect immediate results. Ex-convicts have a decision-making "time lag" developed in prison by many months of time to form any new opinions.
8. Tell him your church wants him and really mean it! Go back and prepare your church to receive him. Your biggest problem could be your own congregation or fellowship.
9. Don't expect him to act completely "normal" by regular congregational standards. He doesn't have a normal background, so please try to accept him as is and let time heal the emotional injuries caused by incarceration.
10. Forgive and forget. Former inmates keenly feel that they have "done their time" and paid their debt to society for their crime. We need to regard it that way, also. Our Savior forgives them and enables us to forgive and this is a very good place to start.

As Christians we need to try to understand the emotional trauma of arrest and incarceration and use compassion and understanding in ministering to the ex-offender. We need the FRUIT of the Holy Spirit in our own lives as outlined in Galatians 5:22—Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Humility and Self-Control to effectively carry out this important ministry. We need to approach this ministry as outlined in Hebrews 13:3 "Remember the prisoners as though in prison with them." If we mentally put ourselves in prison with them, we will begin to understand their unusual needs.

Finally, expect success in your work, but be willing to accept some failures. When you succeed, you have accomplished one of the most difficult tasks that any Christian can tackle as you minister to an ex-offender. Success in this area makes you a real professional, but more than that, you have reached a new person in a difficult situation for our Lord and Savior. His changed lifestyle will benefit society, but much more important is the salvation of another soul. There is no greater accomplishment.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF INCARCERATION

Society pays a tremendous cost whenever someone is sent to prison. There is the expense of a trial and welfare along with the actual cost of the lockup for a period of years. The author estimates that all the expenses of his trial, appeal, incarceration, parole and final discharge probably cost our government more than one hundred thousand dollars. His crime was relatively simple and easy to prosecute and his actual prison sentence was less than one year.

Some criminal trials alone have totaled more than half a million dollars. These costs are not the only price society pays for crime and the justice system. The final and total figure may never fully be counted because the prison population is growing so rapidly in America, and there are the long-term effects or costs of locking people up. This is the hidden price that society pays for incarceration many years into the future.

Christians need to be aware of the long-term results of a prison sentence so they can effectively minister to anyone regardless of how long it has been since they left the jail cell. While most Christians never return to prison, almost any ministry to ex-offenders will eventually deal with the delayed effects of a prolonged lockup. What is the ex-offender going to be like after a few years of freedom? Here are seven things you can look for:

FIRST: Ex-offenders who have served a substantial prison sentence (six or eight years or more) may permanently withdraw from society including church attendance. This is not hard and fast rule, but if they have served 15 years or more they may never fully return to regular church attendance and other public events. They are not against the church or organized meetings, but would rather just not be in any group. They seldom attend meetings of any kind as a result of their prison experience.

SECOND: They will distrust the justice system in spite of many good years of prison free life. They have seen the system fail for them so many times that they probably will never fully trust *any* political system ever again.

THIRD: They know how to live a simple life without a lot of material possessions. While you can say that this is a matter of economic necessity for many of them, the truth is that they have learned to live the simple life while they were in prison and are satisfied with it.

FOURTH: They don't rock the boat. Ex-convicts seldom change jobs or leave satisfactory employment situations once they get established on the outside of the prison wall. Again this is not a firm rule, but they tend to make basic economic changes in their life less often than the average man on the street.

FIFTH: They tend to "think evidence." They know what makes up "proof" or "evidence" in a criminal trial and tend to conduct their legitimate affairs on a daily basis as though they might have to "prove" their actions in court some day. They seldom get lost for several days. They are always able to substantiate their activities and daily location by paper work or bonafide witnesses. They get receipts for cash purchases. This is done to various degrees by long-term convicts.

SIXTH: They are loners by regular social standards. They are very nice fellows to be with (or talk to) but would rather be alone.

SEVENTH: Almost all of them have a deep-seated faith in some kind of higher power or God. This may be the reason that they have stayed out of jail for so long. It may take the form of true Christianity through a positive salvation experience with our Lord Jesus Christ or it could be a simple respect for a higher power. They know that God is real from experiences that they have had inside the prison. We need to direct that faith to include a personal relationship with our Lord and Savior.

Not all of the above traits will show up in every long-term ex-offender, but most men who have served an extended prison sentence will show some of these attitudes. When we minister to them we

need to review the list and see how each of these potential problems can affect our ministry. The ex-offender may seem distant and aloof when he is really not that way at all. He probably will not beat your door down to talk to you, but he can be very cooperative because he has had a lot of training in just getting along in the world.

He represents very little threat to society and his passive attitude will make your approach to him easy to present and difficult for him to actually receive. Don't misjudge him because of his conservative or loner attitudes. He is hearing you. He respects your message and you are reaching him for our Lord Jesus Christ. Work him into one or two activities in your church such as Bible study or your local jail ministry and then let him do his own thing. You can successfully minister to the long-term ex-offender if you know and understand your subject.

It is not normal for a human being to be locked up over a prolonged period of time. The long-term effects of incarceration become more evident the longer an individual is held in custody. If the prisoner makes good use of his time and regularly exercises his mind and his body, he can survive many years of incarceration without undue loss of normal human responses. Much will depend on the actual type of lockup. Outside of the emotional damage to his well-being, the brain and body tend to function well in a lockup. Prisoners are generally free from drugs and alcohol during their sentence and some medical care is usually available.

The *type* of medical service is what contributes to their trauma. This is why you will often hear prisoners complain about medical care in a prison and frequently they are right. Remember Hebrews 13:3 and picture yourself locked up and dubious about the medical care you were receiving for a health condition or symptoms you thought you had. You can't see a different doctor of your choice so this dilemma would have long lasting emotional effects on anyone. You may think you are sick from imprisonment long after you are released and you may just be right.

When you enter a prison and stay there for years, you lose track of prices, automobile models, the job market, clothing styles, and even everyday idioms or street slang. Time literally stands still as one month turns into the next. So do the years and even the decades. Correctional officers, prison volunteers and chaplains who go in and out of a prison on a daily basis don't fully understand what it is like to enter a prison one time and abruptly stay there for months or years. As we begin to deal with the individual ex-offender and minister to him, we will always encounter the long-term effects of incarceration. It will be evident for many years even after he is released.

The ex-offender tends to blame his economic and family problems on his incarceration. If his wife was unfaithful or his children undisciplined, he tends to blame "the system" that went wrong for him rather than himself for committing the crime. "After all, look at all the ones that they didn't catch who have done things much worse than I did," he says. "How come I didn't get probation when so many others did." These are real questions that defy firm answers except to be judgmental. This is the last thing that Christians should do to win this ex-offender for Christ.

What can we do and how can we lead this wary individual to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ? It's not easy but let's look at some real answers from the *standpoint* of the ex-offender.

1. **God is love** and the former prisoner needs love and not judgment. Simple, kind gestures and real friendships are more meaningful to prisoners after incarceration than ever before. He needs a real friend. Take time to be one and take the Gospel with you each time you go.
2. **He appreciates little things** more than ever. The sunrise, a little child, a dog or cat, and a home cooked meal. Anything that he was deprived of in the prison has special meaning. Real silverware and a wooden toilet seat are little things that he was deprived of for many years.
3. **Recognize him as an individual** with a personal experience background and not as a jailbird with a past. He may regard your overweight or your divorce or other socially acceptable personal problems as far more serious than his own prison stay. His background and yours are different. Recognize it as such and accept his background as "equal" to yours. Maybe this is tough for a Christian to do, but it is necessary to reach this man for Christ. Our Lord associated with sinners and tax collectors who were regarded as the very worst type of people in New

Testament days. Our Master would readily befriend ex-convicts today regardless of their crimes and prison terms. We can hardly do less.

4. **Involve the ex-convict** in your Christian social life and use *his* talents whenever you can or wherever he is willing. You may find him very reluctant shortly after release but this is normal. It takes one to three years or more after release from the penitentiary to “brush the cell hall dust off your shoes,” as we say of a return to normal life by regular social standards. The long-term effects of his jail experiences will still be evident, but he will be thinking more normally after that. It is at this time that we can draw him into our Christian group and use his talents. If he can cook or write or do carpenter work, then we should request his help and tell him that we *really* need him. It will be hard for him to say no because he wants to help. He wants the love and he needs the attention that your project will give him. Most of all you will be there to lead him closer to the Lord and do it on a basis that is real as far as an ex-offender is concerned.

Don't forget the long-term effects of incarceration. Years after his release from prison the ex-offender still doesn't trust our justice system or “fly the flag,” so to speak. His mistrust may not be fully justified but it is very real to him and a permanent part of the cost of jail time in America today. Billions of dollars in productivity has been lost to our society by talented men who had the misfortune of going to jail. When they get out of prison their attitude is often wary and mistrusting. As Christians we can help to overcome this gigantic social problem and not only minister to him but help him return to society as a normal productive individual.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE POWER OF PRAYER IN PRISON

The most powerful tool that a Christian can use to minister in prison is prayer. Inmates, who have experienced the real power of prayer coming through the walls of a big penitentiary or prison cell, tell of many spiritual experiences that cannot be a simple matter of coincidence. Emotions may run high as Christian convicts relate their own personal encounters with God through prayer. They tell of actually feeling loved ones praying for them from outside the prison wall as they sit in their cells inside the prison. Few prisoners who have experienced this remarkable sensation will ever again doubt the tremendous power of prayer anywhere whether it is inside or outside the prison environment.

Our great and almighty God responds to human crisis situations and hears our prayers in a special way during times of distress or war or other physical and emotional crises such as a hospital stay. The author can remember his dad telling him as a young boy about the power of prayer on the mission field in Madagascar. My dad would relate the feeling of uplift and protection he had received from God when, through correspondence from his loved ones in America, he would find out by letter that a church group 12,000 miles away had been praying for him at a specific time. Fifty years later, I can testify to this experience personally as my wife would pray for me many miles away outside the prison. I would feel the prayers while I was locked up in my cell. I fully realized what was happening and I often “prayed back” a prayer of love and concern for her. I would also pray for her during the hours that she actually traveled more than 200 miles one way to the prison. She would confirm the feeling of God’s guiding hand as she proceeded to and from the prison.

Don’t ever underestimate the power of prayer to reach inside the toughest prison with the tightest security regulations and bring help and protection to the inmates. Your intercession will be a blessing to them and an exceptional source of spiritual strength. Prayer has prevented much violence and started revivals in many big prisons. It has been a major source of strength for Christian convicts in very difficult circumstances.

Prayer is an essential part of a Bible study or church service inside the prison wall. Inmates expect to pray and many of them will participate if you give them a chance. Bowing their heads and closing their eyes often gives them a special peace and temporarily removes them from their surroundings. Praying by themselves or mentally participating in prayer can work wonders in the personal life of Christian inmates. It is a way of acknowledging the peace and tranquility of the Holy Spirit and gives and brings him the relief that he really needs from his current dilemma.

This humble and private conversation with god transcends the prison and brings him personal peace in this world of incarceration. Speaking to God is “freedom” and one way out of the prison. Prayer is “Private Stash,” as they say in prison. Private stash is a prison term for personal property that you are allowed by prison authorities to keep. Prayer is something that you can have and keep in prison. Prayer is the only answer to the incarceration that an inmate can totally rely on 24 hours a day.

Prayer is a must before you enter any prison to visit or conduct any kind of ministry. The author does not know of a single prison ministry anywhere in the United States (from Alaska to Florida) that does not have prayer before a prison visit. Prayer is a necessary part of the routine to enter any prison and provides the basis for the rest of the visit. Whether it is the county jail, maximum security penitentiary or half-way house, the prison visitor needs to pause outside and ask God to bless his efforts. Pray for guidance in all that you do and say. You must do this even if the visit is to one inmate alone or even if the visit is held in the regular visiting area and not in the chapel. Prayer is the most important thing that you will ever do as you bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ behind the walls of our nation’s prisons. Prayer is the only way you can reasonably expect to succeed. Prayer is the beginning and the end (the Alpha and the Omega) of every prison visit.

Leading an inmate to know and believe the Gospel of the Lord Jesus requires much prayer and reliance on the Holy Spirit. Often the prison volunteer must guide the new Christian through repentance and a prayer of confession and assurance.

When you minister in prison you do the most important work that any Christian can ever do when you lead an inmate to a personal saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Remember the five scriptural steps to salvation. (Quotations from Scriptures below are from NIV.)

1. **ACNOWLEDGE:** “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). “God have mercy on me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13).
2. **REPENT:** “Unless you repent, you too will all perish” (Acts 3:19).
3. **CONFESS:** “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins, and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9).
4. **BELIEVE:** “For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16). “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16).
5. **LIVE:** “So, then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness” (Colossians 2:6-7).

As you explain the meaning of these passages, the Holy Spirit can work and create saving faith. Be sensitive to that working of the Spirit. Ask the inmate questions such as: Does he understand the meaning of the five steps and the passages. Does he believe them. Ask him if he is willing to confess his sins and ask forgiveness from God. If he confesses faith, the Holy Spirit has created it.

We must keep in mind that the inmate sometimes has a natural fear of “confessing” his crime publicly, especially if the court appeals process is still under way. We need to help the inmate understand that Jesus Christ died for all sins whether they be against God or the government or both. You can assure him that there is no need to single out his particular crime unless he wants to. All have sinned (Romans 3:23) and everyone needs forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Even the chaplain and the prison guards need forgiveness and salvation.

When the inmate is ready and wants to pray, you can help him find words to talk to god. The prayer does not create faith or lead him to faith. If he says he believes and wants to pray, the Holy Spirit has already brought him to faith even though it may be a very weak faith. The prayer can confess sin, acknowledge the faith that is there, and ask God to increase that faith and give help to live a changed life.

The prayer may include words like this:

Lord, Jesus, I believe that You died for all my sins. I am sorry for the wrongs I have done and ask Your forgiveness. Thank You for helping me to believe. I need You and want You to help me serve You and to manage my life from this day on. Amen.

As you leave this kind of sacred moment, remember that this inmate is like a newborn baby. He will need much attention and care and your continued prayers. Walk away with joy and praise to God but with the commitment to continue to help this inmate and to use the power of intercessory prayer to the honor and glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE PRISON CHAPLAIN

The chaplain's office at any large prison is the focal point of the prison ministry. There usually is one or two state paid chaplains (either part-time or full time) at each institution who is a *staff officer* at the prison. He has the responsibility for *all* religious services at one or more prison locations and he performs many state as well as religious functions. He has the staff responsibility for all the volunteers or church paid chaplains that come into the prison. He can and does *totally* control all religious activities in the prison.

At some penal institutions, it has happened that the chaplain obtained his job through political influences even though he did not have regular clergy training. He was able to obtain ordination through a church group that doesn't require a formal church education. As such, he was able to assume his post as a full-fledged chaplain. It is also true that sometimes trained chaplains just don't care. When these things occur, the chaplain may or may not function effectively as a viable minister and staff officer of the prison. In any case, he has control. If you are unable to get approval of reasonable requests to minister in prison, this could be the reason. There are very few chaplains that fit this description. Most are highly dedicated professionals. It could also be that your request does not conform with the security requirements or religious objectives of the prison ministry program at the institute. How can we know this?

FIRST: Talk at length with the chaplain and ask him what you can do to help. Seek specific needs in the prison's religious program that you are qualified to perform. Adapt your ministry to fit these needs.

SECOND: Be aware that (while there are no religious denominations as such in prison) the head chaplain of any institution would much prefer your ministry if it conforms to his basic religious beliefs. Most chaplains are broad-minded about this, but some staff decisions have been made on occasion based on denominational considerations. Before you jump to conclusions that a chaplain is sidetracking your religious views, be sure that he does not already have that view well represented by another ministry already active in the prison. A frank discussion of your ministry with the head chaplain and his needs would be beneficial. Most chaplains that the author has worked with in prisons throughout the United States are fair and interdenominational. They are highly dedicated Christians who eagerly seek your help as an outside prison volunteer. They will do all they can to help you spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ inside the prison.

THIRD: Go into the prison as a part of another group to get acquainted with the institution. You will learn a lot about the real needs inside the wall and your future requests to the chaplain can be properly directed after you have been exposed to the needs a few times. You will be impressed with *both* the scheduling that a dedicated chaplain can do for your ministry as well as his fairness in dealing with your requests.

There are 10 specific functions that the chaplain's office performs as a staff officer of the prison. You should be aware of them, so you can make use of them.

1. **Schedules** all religious services and obtains security clearance for the participants.
2. **Counsels** with the inmates inside the prison about their spiritual life. This is a big job and involves crisis counseling and lifesaving techniques. Our nation's prison chaplains have prevented hundreds of suicides by prisoners just by knowing when to be there and what to say.

3. **Sets up special one-time religious** visits for any worthwhile purpose between a prisoner and a religious organization outside the walls. This could include church sponsored social service or welfare organizations and special ministries.
4. **Keeps a supply of religious books,** magazines and other spiritual reading material available for the inmates to obtain and read.
5. **Maintains and office** inside the prison with ready access to the inmates. Often this office will process hundreds of letters and requests monthly on spiritual matters for the inmates by concerned outsiders.
6. **Advises prisoners of the death** of a loved one and counsels with him. This is especially difficult in a prison situation. He recommends necessary prisoner transportation and security arrangements to attend the funeral if the death is a mother or father or other close relative of the inmate. Funeral attendance regulations vary from prison to prison.
7. **Conducts inmate baptisms** or arranges for others to do this. Most chaplains baptize hundreds of inmates over their years of service because the average prison inmate has never been baptized.
8. **Represents** the institutions to all *area churches* regardless of denomination in the prison community. This is a public relations job as well as an opportunity to solicit volunteers and understanding for the prison ministry.
9. **Maintains his relationship** with *his own synod or church group* outside the prison wall to promote understanding and cooperation with the organized church to which he belongs.
10. **He prays daily** for his volunteers as well as the inmates and their families. He is the spiritual leader of the institution—both staff and inmate.

The head chaplain also works with the prisoner's family as much as possible and counsels them as much as time will permit. While he is a very busy man, he is particularly mindful of the need to maintain the family structure as a vehicle for success and rehabilitation after the inmate is released. Much of his time is spent inside the prison with the inmates and religious services but he has constant contact with the prisoner's family through the prisoner visiting room setup in the prison and his office as a chaplain of the institution.

He may also be called on to make recommendations to prison officials regarding inmate custody and security considerations as part of his position as a staff officer of the prison. The more of this that he does, the more the inmates may be suspect of his spiritual message.

Chaplains attempt to avoid the image of a "guard" inside the prison and most of them are genuine spiritual leaders, leaving the security functions to other officers. In any case, the office of the chaplain of a large penal institution is one of the most important functions at the prison. It is a life-saving and soul saving position with much temporal and eternal value at stake. Few Americans outside big prisons fully realize what the chaplain does, but his work has significance without parallel in our society today. May God richly bless him in his work.