

Ministering to Those in Prison

Joe R. Garman

Pray

Pray earnestly and specifically that God would make it clear to you and others whether this is the ministry you should become involved with and, if so, what HE would have you do.

- Federal prisons (maximum, medium, and minimum security)
- State prisons (maximum, medium, and minimum security)
- Local jails (maximum, medium, and minimum security)
- Reformatories (maximum, medium, and minimum security)
- Work release centers
- Halfway houses
- Road camps
- Work farms
- Juvenile detention halls
- Prison reception and diagnostic centers
- Prison hospitals
- Confined minority or ethnic groups

Pray about what you might consistently do if you were to become involved in a prison ministry.

- Visit inmates
- Assist with worship services
- Provide special musical programs
- Teach Bible studies
- Conduct one-on-one counseling services
- Teach classes in a specific skill, trade, or personal adjustment
- Provide literature, tapes, or films
- Sponsor Bible correspondence courses
- Lead recreation programs
- Correspond with inmates
- Sponsor someone on parole or probation
- Locate jobs for ex-offenders

Pray, committing yourself to a fixed period of involvement as soon as the opportunity becomes available.

- "Lord, I believe you can forgive their failures and I know you can meet their needs; therefore, in ministering with them I will not seek the praise of men but only the Glory and Will of my God."
- "Father, show me how you want to love these people through my words, actions, and attitudes, in such a way that my own personal prejudices will not interfere with the workings of Your Holy Spirit."
- "My God, put your love in me so I can freely give it away to them, thus reflecting what they need to see and hear from you through me."

Respect

Respect the fact that they, too, have been made in the image and likeness of God.

- They are not inanimate objects, but human beings; men, women, boys, and girls who love, who cry, who fear, and who hope
- When love becomes warped or completely destroyed it is simply an opportunity for God to enter the situation and through His divine love mend broken hearts, heal bruised relationships, and introduce them to a new and vital life with Jesus Christ as their Redeemer, Lord, and Savior.
- From God's perspective we are all guilty and condemned for our sins, but you can be the one to bring the Good News telling of a true and caring love" that "believes all"...and when failure takes away belief "hopes all"...and when failure takes away hope "endures all". (I Corinthians 13:7)

Respect the fact that they have seen and are presently experiencing a side of life you, hopefully, may never encounter.

- "With all humility and gentleness, with patience, show forbearance to them in love" by listening with understanding to their insights and perspectives of Scripture. (Ephesians 4:2)
- Bear in mind that when the visit is completed you are free to walk out through the front gates and return home to your family, while they must resort to cold, impersonal, gray stoned cells, where thrives a lonely, humiliated, angry, and apprehensive environment.
- Deep emotional, psychological, and spiritual needs coupled with the constant fear and threat of violence, requires you to be non-judgmental, while sending forth a clear communication of God's Word and Grace through your example of conversation, "serving them through love". (Galatians 5:13)

Respect the Power and Ability of the Holy Spirit.

- When God gets us alone by imprisonment, affliction, heartbreak, or broken dreams; by disappointment, sickness, or a soiled relationship - when He gets us absolutely alone and we cannot find the strength to debate or question, then and only then can He clearly speak to our inner man.
- Just as it was through broken pitchers that God provided light for Gideon's army; through broken bread that the hungry multitudes were satisfied; through a broken box that the precious fragrance anointed the Savior; through a broken body that salvation came to all who truly believe; so it is that hearts are most easily filled when they are broken. (Psalm 51:17)
- The only thing heavier than the burden of the inmate's sin is the weight of love that can remove it.

Invite

Invite them to speak about their insights and experiences in life.

- Lead them into an orderly conversation by choosing a certain portion of Scripture, then ask what change or changes they would have to make in their lives to honor that passage.
- Ask them to assist you in forming a prayer list so you can remember their needs.
- Discuss the fundamental Christian themes of love, grace, hope, peace, judgment, and forgiveness (relating to themselves, to others, and to God).

Invite other inmates to join you in Bible study.

- If Christ is your head, make your outreach program ridiculously big by covenanting with the Lord that you will work with anyone within the confines of the prison, regardless of race, creed, or color.
- "Increase and abound in love for one another and for all men, just as we also do for you." (I Thessalonians 3:12)
- Said one chaplain regarding more volunteers, "I might work in depth with perhaps one hundred men during a year, and see several hundred others to a much lesser extent; and that's out of a prison population of two thousand, with a turnover of perhaps a thousand men a year."

Invite those within your congregation and community to work with you in ministering among inmates.

- Members within your congregation can demonstrate practical and caring love by providing transportation for family members to and from the prison.
- Make available to your congregation books, brochures, and films that describe prison life, and ask your missions committee to assist in the support of your material needs.
- Generate prayer cells that will pray at specific times of the day for you and those with whom you are working (prison officials, guards, inmates, inmate's families, and the chaplain(s)...by name).

Support

Support the administration.

- There should be a clear understanding between you and the administration concerning how you intend to operate, by you identifying your goals and letting the administration know how you view your ministry and their authority.
- Familiarize yourself with prison routine and security regulations so you can follow all the rules, thus increasing respect and cooperation from guards and staff who will be evaluating you on the basis of your sensitivity in these areas.
- One volunteer can ruin a program that has taken the chaplain months to prepare; therefore, if you decide your primary desire is to reform the system, find some other channel to express that desire...but don't do it through the religious program or under the guise of a Christian volunteer.

Support the chaplain.

- His direction can prevent your breaking the rules, being a security risk, or becoming a source of irritation to prison authorities.
- If you are going to make contacts in the free world for the inmates, such as lawyers, family, friends, (or visa versa), make sure the chaplain is aware of your plans.
- Never, under any circumstances, try to undermine the chaplain's program, rather "be devoted to him in brotherly love; giving preference to one another in honor." (Romans 12:10)

Support the inmates

- Your preaching, teaching, and counseling should be Biblical, well illustrated, simple, and to the point.
- "Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart."(I Peter 1:22)
- Do not settle for offhand, ill-prepared material in either sermon or song, but be prepared to handle aright the greatest treasures this present world has ever known.

Oppose

Oppose unsound doctrine.

- Get them into the Word, out of themselves, and under His Lordship by using your sword, the Word of God, in a war you expect to win.
- Put a glow on your face as you speak of His grace, and press toward victory over sin and Satan using the Bible as your spiritual weapon.
- Speak with clarity, not complacency or timidity; talking...sharing...caring...one on one...in grateful service.

Oppose being manipulated by the inmates.

- Do not do for one what you cannot do for all, as this can result in immaturity and jealousy through favoritism.
- Do not act on anything unless it is factual, or both the inmates and staff will lose their respect for you. (Proverbs 13:3; 14:15; 16:20)
- Expect to be checked out, tested, looked at from a distance, used, asked to do favors, and at times mistreated; but stand firm in your commitment and compassion for them and the staff, and you will not lose their respect.

Oppose ugly attitudes

- The quickest way to double an ugly attitude is to let it pass with a shrug instead of a sigh.
- Before the judgment seat of Christ, our service will be judged not only by how much we have said, but also by how much we have condoned through silence. (Matthew 12:36; Mark 8:38; II Corinthians 5:10)
- To know an ugly attitude exists, whether it be in the self-righteous church member or self-centered inmate, and do nothing, is to be callused and indifferent toward sin.

Nurture

Nurture while realizing that when you take away the "failures" in the Bible you have surprising little left to read.

- The nation's prison, reformatory, and jail population has increased at a record annual rate of 12% to 18% since 1973, resulting in over two million men, women, boys and girls who will go to sleep tonight behind STEEL bars.
- America is now experiencing the highest imprisonment rate and this upward trend in imprisonment figures shows no sign of abating unless more Christian volunteers get involved.
- The 500-600 full time chaplains presently serving jails, reformatories and prisons throughout our nation cannot possibly meet the spiritual needs of 3,333 inmates per chaplain; therefore, Christians must take a more active role in ministering to these who are, at this very moment, sitting in totally unevangelized cells without God, without Christ, and without a hope in the world.

Nurture by conducting yourself in a Christian manner.

- Be honest
- Keep your word
- Present Christ
- Don't take on the responsibility of trying to solve all the inmate's problems
- See inmates as individuals
- Keep your objectivity
- Be dependable
- Don't go in as an expert
- Don't minister out of duty
- Don't use religious terminology (such as justification, sanctification, consecration, etc.), or inmate jargon or "slang" to try to impress
- Be there in person, letter, or card during crisis periods
- Feed the flock

Nurture through love.

- "And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds." (Hebrews 10:24)
- Love...hoping for no return, not keeping account of evil, rather dwelling on things that are above.
- Love, preach, teach, heal, love, work, pray, give, love, bind, loose, live, love, learn, follow, evangelize, love, urge, encourage, wait, love, above all, love.