



A Guide To Caring For The Incarcerated

Introduction

The Church does not enter prisons as judge. It enters as witness—witness to mercy among people who most need it. Imagine walking into a room filled with forgotten people. Men dressed in blue, faces tattooed, numbers replacing their names. Now picture Jesus standing among them—not as someone trying to keep his distance, but as one of them, saying, 'Whatever you do for them, you do for me.'

Jesus didn't say, 'Visit the wealthy,' or 'Feed the comfortable.' He said the imprisoned, the marginalized, the overlooked, the invisible. Jesus flips the script on compassion: our care for those behind bars is our care for Him.

"The gospel is good news of mercy to the undeserving. The symbol of the religion of Jesus is the cross, not the scales."

— John Stott

At the heart of the Gospel is a radical truth: no one—no past, no mistake, no prison wall—can put themselves beyond God's redeeming love. Every person bears the image of God. Our character, and the character of culture, is revealed not by how we treat the influential, but by how we treat the poor, the disfavored, and the condemned. To serve faithfully, we must hold justice and mercy together. This is the pathway to restoring human dignity for everyone.

As John Chrysostom wrote in 1606 AD: "Do not neglect those who are in prison; their suffering is a call to mercy." And as Anglican missionary bishop Lesslie Newbigin reminds us: "The Church is the bearer of a message of hope in a world of despair." Ministries often grow through small, consistent acts of presence— showing up, listening, and offering hope & mercy where it seems absent.

Section 1 | What Incarcerated Persons Need

Incarcerated individuals often experience deep loneliness, shame, and spiritual confusion. They need the Church to provide:

Hope & Assurance Offer hope and the assurance of forgiveness

Spiritual Guidance Provide spiritual guidance & friendship

Dignity Treat them with respect and dignity

Listening Be listened to without judgment

Ministry begins not with teaching, but with presence, prayer, and listening.

Section 2 | What The Church Can Offer

When the Church visits the incarcerated, it brings hope, kindness, and love where despair is deepest. The Church brings hope where there is despair, light where there is darkness, and life where there is brokenness.

The Gospel

Forgiveness, new beginnings, and the radical truth that no one is beyond God's reach.

Community & Mentorship

Small groups, one-on-one guidance, and pastoral care that remind incarcerated individuals they are seen, heard, and valued.

Resources for families & reintegration

Supporting visitation, guiding reentry, and connecting people to education, jobs, and social services.

Advocacy

Raising awareness, promoting justice, and fostering mercy in society.

Prayer & Worship

Gatherings, Scripture, intercessions, and the Eucharist that restore dignity and connect people to the wider Body of Christ.

Emotional Support

Listening without judgment, encouraging responsibility, and walking alongside those processing trauma, grief, and shame.

Faithful volunteers

Consistent presence, Christ-like love, and role modeling that demonstrates integrity, care, and accountability.

Section 3 | Partnering with Prison Authorities

Sustainable ministry flourishes when volunteers cultivate trust with correctional staff. A healthy approach includes:

A Healthy Partnership Approach

- Respecting institutional authority
- Cooperating with prison chaplains
- Maintaining professional conduct
- Avoiding adversarial attitudes

An "us vs. them" mindset undermines ministry. Partnership builds stability, trust, and hope for those incarcerated.

When volunteers and correctional staff work together, the people inside benefit most. Trust is built slowly—and lost quickly.

Section 4 | Prayer and Liturgical Resources

The Anglican tradition offers rich resources for worship and prayer through the Book of Common Prayer. Recommended practices:



Prayer Gatherings

Regular communal prayer that unites incarcerated believers with the wider Body of Christ.



Scripture Readings and Intercessions

Readings and intercessions for families and victims that name pain and proclaim grace.



Celebration of the Eucharist

The sacrament that restores dignity and reminds all participants of their place in God's family.



Liturgical Worship

Worship that restores balance, names pain, and proclaims grace.

These practices remind incarcerated believers that they remain part of the wider Body of Christ, even behind walls. **They are part of the Family of God.**

Section 5 | Concluding Reflection

There is no place where human suffering is so visible as in prisons."

— John Howard, founder of the modern prison reform movement

For the Church, this reality is not a barrier—it is a calling. Where society sees punishment as a means of justice, the Gospel proclaims repentance, mercy, and new life in Christ. Prison ministry is demanding, but it is life-giving. It is where presence meets hope, mercy meets justice, and human dignity is restored.

Show Up

Be present.
Consistently.
Without Fail.



Listen

Hear what
others refused
to hear.



Pray

Intercede for
those behind
walls and their
families.



Serve

And watch
God transform
lives behind
walls.



Appendix: Volunteer Training Guide for Prison Ministry

This training guide equips volunteers with the theology, skills, and practical knowledge needed to serve faithfully and safely in prison ministry.

- 01 Theology and Purpose**
Understand why this ministry matters.
- 02 Understanding Prison Culture**
Recognize the structured, high-stakes environment of correctional facilities.
- 03 Personal Boundaries and Ethics**
Protect both volunteers and inmates through clear, consistent boundaries.
- 04 Safeguarding and Safety**
Follow diocesan policies to protect everyone involved.
- 05 Trauma Awareness**
Minister with sensitivity to the deep wounds many carry.
- 06 Communication Skills**
Listen deeply and speak carefully to build trust.
- 07 Spiritual Leadership**
Lead Bible studies and prayer with humility and pastoral presence.
- 08 Self-Care for Volunteers**
Sustain effective ministry through healthy personal practices.

Training Module 1 | Theology and Purpose

Understand why this ministry matters.

Every Person Bears the Image of God

No matter what someone has done, their fundamental dignity as an image-bearer of God remains.

Repentance and Transformation Are Always Possible

The Gospel proclaims that no one is beyond God's redeeming reach.

The Church Brings the Gospel to All

Scriptural anchors:

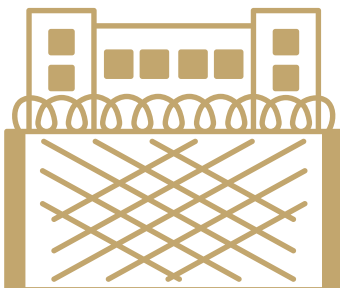
Matthew 25:36, Hebrews 13:3.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does the Church engage in prison ministry?
- What does forgiveness look like in difficult circumstances?
- How do we balance compassion with accountability?

Training Module 2 | Understanding Prison Culture

Prisons are structured, high-stakes environments.



Volunteers must recognize:

- Hierarchical authority and strict rules
- Tensions among inmates
- Emotional stress and trauma
- Volunteers can be seen as resources rather than guides and spiritual friends.

- Approach with humility and self-awareness, not assumptions.

Training Module 3 | Personal Boundaries and Ethics

Boundaries protect both volunteers and inmates.

- ⊗ **Never bring unauthorized items**
- ⊗ **Never exchange money or gifts**
- ⊗ **Never share personal contact information**
- ⊗ **Never give out personal information**
- ⊗ **Never have any contact outside of the scheduled hours of service**
- ⊗ **Never promise favors you cannot fulfill**

Why Boundaries Matter

Training includes recognizing manipulation and responding wisely. Clear, consistent boundaries are not a sign of distrust—they are a sign of professionalism and care for everyone involved. Boundaries are not barriers to ministry. They are the foundation that makes a sustainable, safe ministry possible.

Training Module 4 | Understanding Prison Culture

Follow diocesan policies to protect everyone. Key areas:

Recognizing Emotional Distress

Identify signs of crisis and respond with care.

Responding to Abuse Disclosures

Know how to respond appropriately and compassionately.

Mandatory Reporting

Understand your legal and ethical obligations.

Professional Conduct

Maintain professional conduct at all times.

Training Module 5 | Trauma Awareness



Many incarcerated individuals have faced: abuse, addiction, violence, poverty, or mental health struggles. Principles for trauma-informed ministry:

Listen More Than Speak

Create space for people to share their story at their own pace.

Encourage Hope and Responsibility

Hold both together—affirming dignity while encouraging growth.

Avoid Shaming Language

Words carry weight. Choose language that restores rather than wounds.

Respect Emotional Boundaries

Do not push for disclosure or emotional response. Let trust develop naturally.

Training Module 6 | Communication Skills



Effective ministry depends on listening deeply and speaking carefully. The goal is trust, not lectures.

Practice Active Listening

Give your full attention. Reflect back what you hear. Resist the urge to fix or advise.

The goal is trust, not lectures.

Avoid Judgmental Language

Speak in ways that affirm dignity and open doors rather than close them.

Ask Thoughtful Questions

Questions invite reflection and show genuine interest in the person.

Be Honest and Consistent

Trust is built over time through reliability and truthfulness.

Training Module 7 | Spiritual Leadership

Volunteers leading Bible studies or prayer gatherings should:

- Facilitate respectful discussion Encourage participation
- Handle theological questions with humility Keep the focus on the Gospel
- Maintain pastoral presence and voice



Resources such as the **Book of Common Prayer** offer structured prayers suited to prison ministry.

Training Module 8 | Self Care for Volunteers

Prison ministry is demanding. Healthy volunteers sustain effective ministry.

**Debrief regularly
with ministry
leaders**



**Maintain a
strong prayer
life**



**Seek pastoral
support as
needed**



**Avoid
overextending
yourself**

*"The Church is the bearer of a message of hope in a world of despair."
— Lesslie Newbigin*

Prison ministry is demanding, but it is life-giving. It is where presence meets hope, mercy meets justice, and human dignity is restored. Show up. Listen. Pray. Serve. And watch God transform lives—even behind walls.