

“When I was in prison...”

If someone in your congregation - or someone related to a member of your congregation - should go to prison or is already there, would you know about it? Or would that family just stay away, hoping no one asks why? Of course, if the prison sentence is public information and the family is active in your church, you may well hear about it. In that case, if the family does not approach you first, you will want to reach out; but do so gently. Search your heart and consult with other pastors, counselors, and, if possible, persons who know the family to be sure you do not offend them by seeming to meddle. Shame, sadly, often keeps those who most need the church from seeking its support, fearing that they will be judged. You can communicate compassion, understanding, and empathy by sending a note first and by calling for permission to visit before appearing on their doorstep. Do not presume to have answers or to already know how they feel, nor should you ask a lot of questions. Communicate by your words and your presence that you are there for them in whatever ways they need and want you to be. If you are turned away initially, indicate that you will check in again later, since feelings and needs may change over time. Persons not affiliated with your church who have a loved one going to prison may assume they would not be welcomed by you and by members of your congregation. If you are involved in prison ministry or are recognized for your outreach to the unfortunate, however, there is some chance you might be approached by persons sentenced to prison or by their families.

Dr. Sandra S. Jenkins, MDIV, CPC, notes that families of those who go to prison are often left in a state of shock and confusion. In effect, she states, “the family does the time, too.” Some families disengage from a loved one who has gone to prison because the humiliation, shame, and pain of rejection by society are just too hard to bear. That disconnection affects the one in jail and may contribute to mental health issues for the whole family. Disconnection from family may also contribute to a repeating cycle of recidivism, with the family member returning to jail over and over again. Whether imprisonment results from a single bad choice or an escalating pattern of misconduct, both prisoners and their families need compassionate and effective support to stay connected and to prevent the experience from destroying their lives. Children of incarcerated parents, in particular, have increased risk of emotional and behavioral disturbance.

Sandra has prepared a fact sheet, [“Daunting Questions Families Want to Ask,”](#) for families of those going to prison, answering some of the questions they may want to ask and helping them know how to go about maintaining a supportive relationship with their loved ones. You will also want to learn all you can about helpful programs in the community, either related to the prison itself or sponsored by some other agency offering support groups and services, such as respite care for children or elders. If there are no support groups in the community, you might work with other congregations to establish one. Some churches use Stephen Ministry Training to equip laypersons to provide emotional and spiritual care for prisoners and their families, as well as for those in a variety of difficult situations.

Some churches help parents in prison connect with their children by recording them reading books for their children. Churches in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, collect donations for telephone cards to help inmates keep in touch with their families. Special efforts to support the children of inmates might include sponsoring their participation in sports and other activities, offering Big Brother/Big Sister relationships, including them in group activities at the church, or

pairing them with families of same-age children. Intentional inclusion in relationships and activities can make a huge difference in the lives of inmates' children, especially – but not limited to the holidays, which are especially depressing for prisoners' families. Churches might use Stephen Ministry training to equip volunteers to accompany family members on prison visits and to walk with them on this painful journey.

Prison Ministries

Many churches participate actively in prison ministries. Through “My Sister’s Keeper,” members of the Cape Elizabeth UMC in Cape Elizabeth, Maine, mentor women prisoners before and after their release. Some pastors and volunteers go into prisons on a regular basis to lead Bible study and to relate to prisoners as channels of God’s love and mercy. As part of a tutoring team, I once worked with individual prisoners on basic reading and math skills. Programs like “Alternatives to Violence” train volunteers to teach prisoners positive ways to handle their feelings and manage conflict. Horizon Prison Initiative in Ohio provides an intensive multi-faith transformational program for prisoners focused on healing trauma, nurturing faith, and learning respect for others and relationship skills. (See “Organizations and Programs” in the Resources list below.) Matt Kantrowitz, who worked as a prison chaplain for 18 years, now volunteers as an evangelist in prison. After Bible studies and worship services, he asks if any of the inmates would like a personal visit. “Some I get to see individually once or twice. Others I end up visiting many times. They really need someone to talk to. I try to be a good listener. By showing them I care, I earn the right to speak. I share scripture with them, pray with them, build relationships, and the Lord does the rest. He is there with us, showing me which scriptures to share, leading and guiding our conversation, and revealing his healing, transforming love to the men.” Volunteers from Central UMC in Ashville, North Carolina, visit nearby prisons offering worship, Disciple Bible, and friendship. Their website (www.centralumc.org/prisonministry) reports that “Recidivism is reduced from around 70% to less than 20% when individuals encounter Christ in prison ministry. Prison officials tell us that participation in faith based programs and worship experiences are the most successful deterrent to recidivism for the majority of inmates.”

Dr. Jenkins provides a very helpful [“Six Rules of Thumb for Prison Ministry”](#) which would apply, whatever kind of program or ministry you choose to implement.

Prison Reform and Restorative Justice

As you minister with those who are in prison and with their families, you will become increasingly aware of injustices in our prison system. In the May 2016 issue of *response* magazine, Lisette Castillo and Janis Rosheuvel issue a passionate call for “Ending Mass Incarceration,” noting that “the United States incarcerates more people per capita than any other nation on earth” and that “the racially biased “War on Drugs” has in the past 40 years incarcerated hundreds of millions of people for largely nonviolent drug offenses, tearing families asunder in the process.” Persons of color often serve longer sentences than white people do for certain crimes. Andrea

Strong shares a personal story that illustrates the devastating effects of the mandatory-minimum sentencing laws passed by Congress. Her brother, a first-time marijuana offender, was sentenced to life in prison. Through an appeal, he did get that sentence reduced to twelve years, but the impact on his life and his family far exceeded the crime he committed.¹ In a January 28, 2016 article, "Mass Incarceration and Race: How Must Christians Respond?" M. Garlinda Burton shares the following statistics: "...more black men are currently in prison in the United States than were held in slavery in the pre-Civil War era; the poorer his family, the more likely a young man – especially a young man of color – will spend time behind bars; there are yawning disparities in many cities between how white teens are disciplined for school infractions, and how black, Latino, and Native American teens are disciplined for the same behaviors."²

The ineffectiveness of our prison system is vividly described in *Orange is the New Black*, by Piper Kerman (Spiegel & Grau, 2011) The author describes herself "...feeling just like this prison system wanted me to – utterly powerless, vulnerable, alone." (p. 191) "...I heard a lot of horror stories, of women with many children they loved but couldn't handle, of families with both parents locked away for long years, and I thought about the millions of children who are put through terrible experiences because of their parents' poor choices." p. 185) She realized her own complicity with their suffering, since she was incarcerated for selling drugs and would have liked some way to make up for that. "But our current criminal justice system has no room for restorative justice, in which an offender confronts the damage they have done and tries to make it right to the people they have harmed.... Instead, our system of "corrections" is all about arm's length revenge and retribution, all day and all night. Then its overseers wonder why people leave prison more broken than when they went in." (p. 180 -1) "Nothing about the daily workings of the prison system focuses its inhabitants' attention on what life back on the outside, as a free citizen, will be like." (180-181) Some think that private for-profit prisons are the answer, but it is unlikely that an institution focused on its own financial success will put the real needs of prisoners first.

Many other articles document the difference treatment and education can make. Katherine Long points out that before 1994, about 350 college education in prison programs were offered nationwide, run by public colleges and universities. Congress then eliminated federal student aid grants for prisoners and banned the use of tax money for postsecondary education in prisons.³ Tracy Mumford, in a November 3, 2015, news report on Minnesota Public Radio⁴, described the results of a pilot program initiated by the Obama Administration to temporarily waive that rule and allow a limited number of colleges to offer courses within prison walls. A researcher reported that those inmates who participated in post-secondary or college program had a 60% lower recidivism rate than those who did not. Similar results may be found for basic education, substance abuse treatment and counseling programs.⁴

Some prison systems practice a more enlightened approach than others. The Missouri Department of Corrections incorporates the practice of restorative justice into its criminal justice system. Each offender within the Department of Corrections is offered the opportunity to participate in activities to repair the harm done to victims and to the community. A 40-hour curriculum helps offenders develop sensitivity toward victims and respect for the rights of others. They participate in community service, pay financial restitution to their victims, and contribute to a Crime Victim Compensation Fund, meeting regularly with a board that holds them accountable.⁵ Stephanie Greiner, a local UM church member and president of her local United

Methodist Women, serves as connections coordinator for her church and as an e-learning curriculum design specialist for the Missouri Department of Corrections. In her article “Restoring Justice, Restoring Lives,” published in the January 2015 issue of *response* magazine, she describes how she invited participants in the restorative justice crafts and sewing program to make and donate quilts to United Methodist fundraisers. Through the “Puppies for Parole” program, inmates teach basic obedience and socialization skills to dogs rescued from shelters. Other inmates work in Restorative Justice Gardens, growing produce for donation to schools, shelters, food banks, and other institutions. “Restorative justice programs help offenders find compassion...” improve self-esteem and responsibility, and offer the experience of forgiveness. (pages 38-40),

Finally, we should advocate for improved hiring standards, increased training, and higher pay for prison staff. Their work is not easy, but they are the ones who can make the system effective – or not. With carefully selected and well-trained staff, our pastoral care and support of inmates and their families, our well-organized and well-grounded prison ministries, and our advocacy for criminal justice and prison reform can make even greater differences in people’s lives – and make our communities safer for everyone.

Notes:

- ¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/11/prison-family-members_n_2664712.html
- ² <http://www.gcorr.org/mass-incarceration-and-race-how-must-christians-respond/>
- ³ <http://www.pressherald.com/2015/01/24/college-courses-creep-back-into-prisons/>
- ⁴ <http://www.mprnews.org/story/2015/11/03bcst-college-courses-for-prisoners/>
- ⁵ <http://doc.mo.gov/OD/DD/RJ.php>

Resources

Reading List

Behind a convict’s eye: Doing time in a modern prison, by K. C. Carceral (Kansas City, MS: Cengage Learning, 2003) This book tells a real-life story from the inside of a prison. Carceral (an assumed name meaning “*of a prison*”) describes in detail the culture, language, life and goings on in prison. Compelling and informative.

Disposable youth, racialized memories, and the culture of cruelty, by H.A. Giroux (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012). Youth today tend to get caught between the prison industrial complex and consumerism, which can reduce them to mere commodities. The criminal justice system is more and more run like a business, seeking to make a profit. Giroux uses critical analysis to explore the issues surrounding this culture and the roles that youth, educators, and citizens play in bringing hope for the future.

Fallen, Felon, and Finally Faith, by Ralph Randall Reagan (Miracle of 4th Street Press, 2010) Ralph Reagan knows a great deal about alcohol addiction, working with gangs and the mob, and prison

life. Once a felon himself, he and his wife have dedicated themselves to helping others through their ministry, The Bread of Life. This book provides an exceptional view point of one rebellious person who gave his heart to Christ and found a whole new life!

High Five: Love Never Fails: 5 Key Principles for The Forever Family, by Ron, Catherine, and Brandon Tijerina (2013) The authors share the five principles they learned that saved their family when they were undergoing a very difficult situation. Ron served 15 years in prison for a crime that he did not commit. Although they suffered deeply, they were determined not to let the experience destroy them. This book provides many insights into the prison experience as well as wisdom for strengthening your family, whatever your circumstances.

Into the abyss: A personal journey into the world of street gangs, by M. Carlie (2002) Retrieved from http://people.missouristate.edu/MichaelCarlie/site_map.htm, this comprehensive article describes the workings of gangs. Update the URL periodically to maintain connection to this article and its updates (latest 2015).

Life after hell: Reflections of a bag lady, by S. Jenkins, PhD, MDiv, CPC, Morrisville, NC: Lulu Enterprises, 2010. When life deals a dirty deck of cards, there is only one thing to do: play strategically and win! Dr. Jenkins does exactly that. In fact, her book details a sobering rags to riches reality that makes a self-help approach seem trivial. She managed to creep out of her past, rising above the injustice of it all with hope for the future and a real reason to live: working with prison populations, diffusing abuse, and coaching them beyond survival toward healing through their own stories.

Ministry with Prisoners & Families: The Way Forward, edited by W. Wilson Goode Sr., Charles Lewis Jr., and Harold Dean Trulear (Judson Press, 2011). A collection of writings based on actual ministries, this book offers insight into policies and practices (including privatization of prisons) that contribute to the unfairness of our criminal justice system and describes approaches that transform lives.

Only Human: A Journey from Convict to Mentor, by Alton Lane with Meghan Vigeant (Alton Lane: 2016) Alton shares the story of his personal transformation through the study and practice of Courageous Communication (a curriculum based on Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication, see below) while he was serving time as an inmate at the Maine Coastal Regional Reentry Center in Belfast, Maine. Through this program he learned to open up his wounds, to communicate in a healthy positive way, to reconnect with his family, and to experience forgiveness. "I was a criminal for a long time, and it just doesn't suit me anymore.... Today I identify myself as a loving person. I have joy and happiness with myself. I'm proud of myself for succeeding." And he now focuses his life on helping others to succeed as well.

Prison Ministry: Understanding Prison Culture Inside and Out, by Lennie Spitale (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2002). The author offers a unique view of prison life, based on his own experience of serving a sentence for assault and robbery. After his conversion to Christianity, he

began leading a weekly Bible study in a local jail and has been involved in prison ministry for more than two decades.

***Prison voices: Lessons on youth recidivism*, by S. Bailey** (Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Montana, Missoula, 2004) (UMI Microform 3133622). This article is a must read, particularly for those who want to know more about how and why our prison system incarcerates younger generations. A sobering report on the effects of our own neglect and media influences. <http://scholarworks.umt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=10526&context=etd>

The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, by Michelle Alexander (New York: The New Press, 2012) Through the “War on Drugs,” our criminal justice system has in effect targeted people of color, labeling them as felons, insuring that they will face increased discrimination and limitations even after serving their time.

Treating adult and juvenile offenders with special needs, edited by J. Ashford, B. Sales, and W. Reid (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001). A revealing article about special needs prisoners, how they end up in prison, and what they experience there.

Organizations and Programs

Alternatives to Violence (AVP): www.avpusa.org

The Alternatives to Violence project is a multi-cultural volunteer organization dedicated to reducing inter-personal violence in our society. The program started in prisons and continues to prepare inmates for successful return to their families and communities, while reducing in-prison violence and recidivism. Because of its success, it has spread to other settings. AVP workshops help participants gain conflict management skills, self-awareness, and positive approaches to life’s challenges. Participants are empowered to lead non-violent lives through affirmation, respect for others, community building, cooperation, and trust. Although the AVP Basic Course Manual provides clear background information and directions for implementing the program, it should be used only by those who have been trained and only by a team, not an individual. Visit the website (www.avpusa.org), call 888-278-7820, or email info@avpusa.org to learn more and to locate a team.

Bill Glass Behind the Walls (<https://www.behindthewalls.com/about-us>)

This ministry conducts high-energy “Day of Champions” and “Weekend of Champions” programs inside prisons across the country, involving well-known athletes and others who give a profound Christian witness.

Courageous Communication:

<http://opencommunication.org/CourageousCommunication-PeggySmith.pdf>

This curriculum was developed by Peggy Smith, a certified Nonviolent Communication (NVC) Trainer living in Maine, in order to incorporate the NVC principles and practices into the program for inmates at the Maine Coastal Regional Reentry Center. Designed for use by persons already skilled in NVC, this 64-page document clearly describes ten teaching sessions, with exercises and worksheets, and a process for guiding participants in applying the principles to real-life situations of their own.

Families Against Mandatory Minimums: <http://famm.org/>

Inflexible sentencing laws undermine justice by preventing judges from fitting the punishment to the individual and to the crime. Mandatory sentencing laws lead to overcrowding of prisons, at a high cost to taxpayers and with poor outcomes for those who are incarcerated.

Horizon Prison Initiative: <http://horizonprisoninitiative.org/>

Horizon Prison Initiative, a multi-faith program transforming prisoners and prisons in Ohio, reduces inmate violence and recidivism by healing the trauma at the root of criminal behavior and nurturing growth in faith. Each September a new group of participants moves into a dormitory where they live in small family units until graduation in the spring. They continue with the normal prison routines during the day, but spend their evenings exploring spiritual development, character reformation, victim awareness, and trauma recovery. When they move back into the general prison population in the spring, they influence others through their newfound sense of value by demonstrating respect for others and using their newly acquired anger management and conflict resolution skills.

Kairos Prison Ministry International, Inc. (KPMI): <http://www.kairosprisonministry.org/>

Kairos is a nationwide course for incarcerated adults (Kairos Inside and Outside) and youth (Torch). It lasts for at least two years. The Outside group caters to families with incarcerated loved ones. The course involves learning unconditional acceptance, reducing stigmas, learning the ins and outs of successful reentry, and how to work with prison officials.

My Sister’s Keeper: Call 207-799-8396) or email mysisterskeeper@ceumc.org.

My Sister’s Keeper, founded in 1999 by a member of the Cape Elizabeth (Maine) United Methodist Church who had been serving as a prison ministry volunteer, offers mentoring for women in transition from corrections. Mentors strive to empower women to make positive choices for their spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental health. Working collaboratively with faith groups, community groups, and government agencies, My Sister’s Keeper provides mentors with training, resources, and practical and emotional support.

Restorative Justice: www.restorativejustice.org

Restorative Justice focuses on efforts to repair the harm caused by crime or bad behavior. Victims, offenders, and community members work together to decide how the offender can make amends. Various organizations, communities, and even schools use this process to focus on the needs of victims and to establish accountability for offenders. Such efforts provide encourage healing and reduce recidivism.

The Ridge Project: www.theridgeproject.com/

The RIDGE Project, a non-profit organization in Ohio, is dedicated to building strong families, whatever their situations and challenges. Its flagship program TYRO is comprised of three components: TYRO Dads, Couple Communication[®] and TYRO Job Ethics Training (JET). TYRO is a holistic, multi-faceted character-building program, designed to strengthen individuals and families. The word TYRO is Latin, meaning novice, apprentice, or someone learning something new. It teaches participants how to overcome destructive generational cycles of poverty, incarceration, and dependency. The RIDGE Project offers Father/Child events and Family Days to help incarcerated parents connect with their children and a strong youth program to develop character, leadership, and life skills.

Stephen Ministries: www.stephenministries.org/

“Stephen Ministries is a not-for-profit Christian education organization founded in 1975 that produces training and resources known for their excellence, practicality, psychological integrity, and theological depth. These resources cover topics such as caring ministry, assertive relating, spiritual gifts discovery, grief support, spiritual growth, and more.” Churches and other organizations train and support lay volunteers who build supportive relationships with those in need.

Straight Ahead Ministries: www.straightahead.com

Founded in Massachusetts in 1987, this organization states that its mission is “to see Jesus Christ transform the lives of juvenile offenders. Over 1.5 million youth are arrested every year in the US, with 500,000 sent to one of nearly 2,000 detention centers across the country. ...Family relationships, community connections, education and employment are all interrupted and negatively impacted. We believe that this time of crisis can become the first step towards a transformed life.” The program begins with young people while incarcerated; then the dedicated staff and volunteers provide support and training as they return to their communities and begin to serve as leaders in their families, workplaces, and communities. Today Straight Ahead provides resources, such as *A Way Out* and *At Risk: Bringing Hope to Hurting Teenagers*, as well as curriculum for Bible studies, recovery discussion groups, discipleship and training around the world.

Women at the Well: www.womenatthewellumc.org/

A United Methodist congregation within the walls of the Iowa Correctional Institution for Women in Mitchellville, Iowa, meets for worship on Thursday evenings in the Sacred Place Chapel. The incarcerated members are joined by men and women from around the state who choose to

worship with them. Volunteers support this ministry and its programs. A Reentry Support Team is a local church-based group of five or more volunteers who agree to meet weekly with a recently released prisoner. Team members focus on four main areas: mentorship, accountability, goal setting, and faith formation. The team serves as both a support and a safety mechanism, holding clients accountable for their actions. With the Team's support and help they can grow and develop healthy adult relationships, while maximizing their chances of successfully reintegrating into the community. For questions or help with forming a Reentry Support Team in your local congregation, contact our Reentry Coordinator, Brenda Hobson, at 515-313-6916.

Websites

Bureau of Justice Statistics: www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=tp&tid=1

This site is helpful for understanding recidivism, incarceration, criminal justice programs, corrections, courts and so much more. Update the URL regularly, as changes affect accuracy and accessibility.

National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA): www.nida.nih.gov/

This site provides a plethora of stats, information and articles related to drug abuse. Again, check the site regularly for variants of URLs.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA): www.samhsa.gov/

Updates and news reports on issues related to mental health and substance abuse, such as bullying, teen depression, suicide, childhood trauma, community violence, etc. Links to hotlines and treatment options.

Jane P. Ives, United Methodist Marriage and Family Ministries Consultant (9/26/2016)

10 Quaker Lane, Portland, ME 04103, 207-797-8930, Janepives@gmail.com

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