



MENTORING PRISONERS: SOME BASIC TIPS FOR GROUPS

“The word of God is not imprisoned.” – 2 Timothy 2:9

The Cell Church has assembled a substantial package of material for individual volunteers who have expressed an interest in mentoring a prisoner through correspondence, which we will make available to groups as well. However, here are some specific tips for groups who are considering “adopting” and mentoring a prisoner:

- **You have to commit.** Many prisoners have been failed, betrayed, or abandoned by numerous people in their lives, and putting themselves out there and trusting someone to care about them and respond to them can be a difficult thing. The group *must* follow through on your commitment. In order to successfully, while at a distance, draw a prisoner into the fellowship of the group and include them at a level that is meaningful for the prisoner as well as comfortable for the group is going to take intentionality and a consistent investment from group members. Remember, just like with any other member of your group, you will be trying to build a community of trust, accountability, encouragement, and spiritual growth – but in this case, at a distance through letters.
- **Boundaries should be clearly established up front.**
 - For the prisoner, your group may very well be the only contact he or she has in the community outside of prison. It would be easy to start feeling entitled to ask the group every time he or she needs help with something. Therefore, the group should agree on the boundaries of the relationship and communicate those clearly to the prisoner up front. The Cell Church can help the group set and communicate its boundaries at the beginning of the mentoring relationship.
 - For the group, there should be a discussion about the comfort of each member, and the group as a whole, to determine the level of openness and transparency in the mentoring relationship. Prisoners, especially if they have been Christians for a while in the prison environment, will tend to be far more direct and open about the details of their personal and spiritual lives than we are in the church out here. Remember, Christian prisoners live around each other 24/7/365 – there are no secrets and you can’t fake it in that kind of environment. The group should not feel that you have to match the prisoner’s intensity or transparency, but should be willing to make a conscious effort to build a relationship that is not only comfortable but open, vital, and edifying for both sides.
- **Expectations should be clearly established up front.** This is particularly important in regard to the length and frequency of the group’s letters. Remember, a prisoner has nothing but time; he or she can sit for hours and write page after page to the group – and probably will. The group should decide up front how much time you will have to commit to this ministry; then you can make it clear how long and frequent the prisoner should expect the group’s letters to be. The more specific this understanding is the better. And of course, whatever you

promise you should consistently deliver. Any change due to circumstances (such as the group taking a break for the summer) should be communicated as far in advance as possible.

- **Logistical details**

- If you are interested in this ministry, The Cell Church will meet with your group to discuss everything in detail, explain the mentor materials, answer questions, and help the group work out proper boundaries, expectations, etc. We will always be available for help or to address questions or concerns at any time during the group's relationship with the prisoner.
- The Cell Church will match your group with a prisoner who has requested a mentor, and provide you with his or her mentor request and any other correspondence we have received, so the group can get a feel for the person before making a decision. If a prisoner asks the group to begin writing to someone besides him or her, please forward that request to us.
- Correspondence will be routed through The Cell Church P.O. Box; we will provide pre-printed envelopes with our return address for the group to use, and will forward letters from the prisoner to the group. If a prisoner informs the group that he or she has been moved to a different facility, please pass that on to us immediately.
- The Department of Corrections frowns on the practice of "piggy-backing" letters; that is, sending multiple letters from (or to) different people in the same envelope. To avoid problems with the mail room, we suggest composing single letters, which can be signed by everyone. Each person could write a paragraph, or the group could simply share what they would like to say, and then one person could be responsible for composing the letter – a responsibility that could rotate through the group. The group should figure out a method that works for you.
- The Department of Corrections is fairly strict about what a prisoner is allowed to receive through the mail. As a general rule, enclose only written materials (such as brochures, tracts, etc.) with your letters. Do not attempt to send stamps, as the prisoner will not be permitted to receive them. (My grandfather, for some indecipherable reason, attempted to mail me a stick of gum in a birthday card once. It was confiscated as contraband – don't do that.) If at some point the group would like to send something else to the prisoner, such as a book, a magazine, a photograph, etc. you should contact The Cell Church for information on how to do so in compliance with DOC regulations.
- If the group builds a strong relationship with a prisoner, The Cell Church should be able to offer options for greater levels of contact (such as phone calls) with him or her. Feel free to contact us with questions about this if the group is interested at some time in the future.

- **A note about terminology:** You may have noticed that we refer to incarcerated men and women as "prisoners." This is deliberate, as other terms – such as "convict," "inmate," or "offender" – have peculiar connotations in the prison culture which we prefer to avoid. Obviously, once you know a particular person's name this problem is largely eliminated.