



MENTORING PRISONERS THROUGH CORRESPONDENCE: AN INVITATION

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

“Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them.” Hebrews 13:3

As disciples of Jesus, most of us have heard this verse before. We probably don't need to be convinced that we are called to love and minister to prisoners, along with orphans and the poor – the vulnerable, disenfranchised, outcast, and powerless of society. We know that our Lord has a heart for such people, and that He calls us to have the same heart, to be His hands and feet, to carry God's love and mercy to them. And yet, if we're honest, many of us find prisoners the most difficult to come to grips with. This is often because, as churches and as individual Christians, we just don't know how to go about ministering to prisoners – we wouldn't even know where to start. So we may decide that it doesn't make sense to try to get directly involved in prison ministry ourselves. Instead, we give money to an established ministry like Prison Fellowship and conclude that is the best way for us to minister to prisoners.

Let's be clear: Prison Fellowship is a wonderful ministry, and we hope the church will support them financially. But The Cell Church is persuaded by Scripture that God's plan for ministering His love and the grace of the gospel to a broken world is through His church, the body of Jesus Christ. That's us – drawn together in local assemblies, gifted by the Holy Spirit and equipped for the work of the ministry. As excellent and worthy as many “para-church” prison ministries are, we cannot simply rest as a church once we have outsourced prison ministry. As with any ministry, not every individual believer is called to prison ministry. Nevertheless, God calls us as His church – and some of us in particular – to jump in and get involved in a hands-on way. Perhaps He is calling you.

The role of The Cell Church is to help the church learn ways to do prison ministry, and to train, equip, and support those in the church who are called to get involved. One of the easiest, and surprisingly impactful, ways to minister to prisoners is through letter writing. Many prisoners find themselves entirely cut off from the rest of the world. They may have no family, or what family they have has fallen out of touch with them, and they don't know anyone outside the prison walls. No one writes them, no one visits; they have no one to call on the phone. It feels as though the world has forgotten them; no one knows, or cares, that they are even alive.

For a man or woman in this situation, a letter can be revolutionary; it can provide a lifeline of connection to the world outside, and a seed of new hope for the future. Prison life is the ultimate routine; the same thing, the same place, the same people, day after day, year after year. Even the chow hall menu repeats over and over. Sometimes the hope of receiving a letter may literally be the only thing a prisoner ever has to look forward to; to hear their name called at mail call means someone out there cares about them.

A kind and encouraging letter can energize and transform a prisoner's entire outlook – on life, and on themselves. A letter writing ministry has the potential to have an impact that almost defies description.

Here is something the church can do – that *you* can do – with relative ease. Yes, there are some rules you should follow, and some things you should avoid, but that's where The Cell Church comes in. We can help you start and maintain a successful correspondence ministry with a prisoner that you are likely to find surprisingly fulfilling and encouraging. Just let us know, and we will be happy to meet with you, explain the ministry and answer questions, and provide everything you need to get started.

So why does The Cell Church refer to this as a “mentoring” ministry? A major focus of The Cell Church is leadership development. We recognize that God has gifted many men and women in the prison church with the same leadership gifts He gives to His church anywhere. However, the opportunities for prisoners to exercise and develop those gifts are limited by the environment. The Cell Church seeks to overcome some of those limitations, so that gifted leaders in the prison churches can reach their full potential as ministers of the gospel, and be equipped to be released with the necessary spiritual maturity, skill, and vision for ministry in their communities.

As part of that effort, we seek to pair gifted Christian leaders, who are usually engaged (or trying to engage) in one form of Christian ministry or another in the prison environment, with mentors who can encourage them, help them to reflect on and grow from their ministry experiences, pray with them, challenge them, hold them accountable – all the functions one would normally expect from a mentor, but accomplished through the mail. The Cell Church has compiled a very useful packet of information on mentoring through correspondence (much of it courtesy of Prison Fellowship), which we can provide to anyone who may be interested in this ministry.

Groups and individuals can both find ways to minister to prisoners by mentoring them through correspondence. We hope you will prayerfully consider being a part of this ministry. With a piece of paper, an envelope, a stamp, and a few minutes of your time, the Lord can use you to make a huge impact on one of His own behind a prison fence.

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’” Matthew 25:31-40