

Ten Ways Prison Ministry Promotes Church Growth

from

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"I never shared my faith with anyone until I got involved in prison ministry..."

"Prison work taught me the true meaning of forgiveness, repentance, and restoration,..."

"My prayer life has a new lease on life due to jail ministry..."

These comments from recent prison ministry volunteers capture some of the joy and spiritual excitement of this strategically important church ministry. The growth of the local church is built on the personal spiritual growth of its members. Prison ministry offers unique, vital opportunities for personal spiritual growth because volunteers get personally involved, even immersed, in the gospel basics: witnessing, Bible teaching, counseling, worship, and encouragement. And when church members catch fire for the Lord, it won't be long before the church grows.

Let's explore ten core impacts prison ministry can have on the local church and its members:

1. **Prison ministry is America's largest spiritual harvest field.** There are more than a million inmates, many of whom are genuinely seeking change, stability, and love in their lives. Many inmates acknowledge that coming to prison was "the best thing that ever happened to me" because they encountered Christ.
2. **Prison ministry does wonders for revitalizing the spiritual lives of volunteers (and subsequently their churches).** There's nothing like sharing the gospel to open ears, teaching the Word to thirsty minds, and praying for people with broken hearts to "rev up" one's spiritual life and commitment. And the newfound spiritual enthusiasm of a prison volunteer is infectious, quickly spreading throughout his or her Sunday school class and friendship network.
3. **Prison ministry breathes new life into church evangelism and outreach programs.** Unfortunately many evangelism and visitation programs are either stillborn or impotent because church members experience so few genuine opportunities to share their faith and see God reap the harvest. Doors are shut in their face, invitations rejected, and the same prospect cards endlessly recycled. In prison ministry, by contrast, spiritually hungry inmates come to the Christian volunteer, often in bountiful numbers--and all under the careful supervision and organization of the chaplain's office!
4. **Prison work can be a real shot in the arm to the Sunday school ministry.** Class members can pray for inmates on a personal level, participate in "pen pal" correspondence with recently converted inmates, and pray for and encourage those who actually represent the class "behind the walls." Inmates are invariably deeply moved to know that a whole class is regularly praying for them. (This is the first time many inmates have ever experienced genuine love from anyone.) Some Sunday school classes even "adopt" an inmate's family in their local area, opening up the vital new arena of compassion ministry.

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5. **Prison ministry enhances worship.** Many prison volunteers receive a renewed vision for worship while attending church services behind the walls. When repentant Christians of all color meet together to express their love for Christ and joy in being spiritual brothers and sisters, things happen. Prison worship is never characterized by stale routine or manufactured emotion-- inmates definitely see themselves as God's chosen people, not God's frozen people!
6. **Prison ministry enhances the church training effort** by preparing volunteers to minister to the unique needs of incarcerated Christians. What they learn about sharing their faith, counseling Bible study, and follow-up is equally applicable in "free world" ministry. Knowing they will actually utilize these skills upon entering prison makes volunteers attentive, serious learners. The necessary training can be supplied by a prison chaplain, a veteran volunteer, or a prison ministry such as Prison Fellowship or Bill Glass Ministries.
7. **Prison ministry gets church members off the pews and outside church walls.** Christians of all backgrounds, education levels, and varieties of spiritual gifts participate in prison/jail ministry. Men and women, young and old, new Christian and "senior saint" all have a place chosen by God to serve. And prison work is never very far away: city and county jails, juvenile detention centers, state and federal prisons, and "halfway houses."
8. **Prison ministry teaches deep spiritual lessons,** such as how to forgive, how to restore, and how to really pray (reminding that God does all the work in prison ministry). It also teaches very practical lessons about listening, patience, cross-cultural communication, and theological diversity among Christians.
9. **Prison ministry promotes cooperation and goodwill among diverse Christians** from different denominations, socioeconomic backgrounds, and theological points of view. Paul's admonition to keep our eyes upon Christ was never more true than in prison ministry.
10. **Prison ministry produces new church members and ministry volunteers.** Contrary to the worry of some myopic pastors that prison ministry will "steal away" their volunteers, Christians who become active in the spiritual basics of witnessing, spiritual teaching/counseling, and prayer gain a renewed desire to serve their local churches. Many times it is the pastor or staff member who is most revived by contact or personal involvement with prison ministry. Just listen to the testimony of pastors and lay people actively engaged in prison work—there's always an unmistakable spark of joy and enthusiasm when they share their experiences before the local church.

Above all else, prison ministry is a shower of blessings for all those involved. You can experience the wonder and joy of leading people to Christ and seeing them start their lives over in ways productive to society and pleasing to God. You see prayers answered in timely and miraculous ways, strengthening your personal prayer life. You experience complete dependence on God for ministry success after realizing that nothing lasting happens in prison through purely human effort and striving. You come to understand deep down inside the awful nature and consequences of sin and the unique role of Christ in creating new creatures. Prison ministry shows us why indeed we're all brothers and sisters united in Christ.

The Do's of Prison Ministry

- Do remember that inmates are human beings just like everyone else. The only difference between us and inmates is that "we didn't get caught for our crimes."
- Do team up with a least one other person, preferably a group of volunteers, in approaching prison ministry. Christians are to be commended whenever they work together and thus pray with a common spirit and mind.
- Do show love and respect for all inmates, including those who want nothing to do with "religion" and those who may not give you a kind reception.
- Do invite and mentor other church members to share in your prison ministry blessings. Sometimes a personalized invitation to get involved is the only thing keeping a church member from participating in prison ministry.
- Do expect to make a real difference in the lives of prison inmates even if you are not an experienced soul winner or veteran prayer warrior. God equips all Christians to carry on His essential work.
- Do enlist the support and interest of the church staff for your work in prison ministry, so they won't feel you have abandoned serving the church. Show them how your involvement in church has revitalized your spiritual life and how it may be the very thing to get "dead wood" church members involved in spiritual ministry for the very first time.

Taking Potty Breaks While Mentoring. Please don't use restrooms in inmate areas away from our mentoring "desks." If needed, do ask the officer to make a restroom available (administrative area or other area) and then go back to your mentee. One of our fellows tried to use the facilities recently but was intercepted and sent to the officers to ask. The officer went to inspect it beforehand and afterwards since it is a means of passing items between prisoners and people from the outside. You must first ask an officer if you can leave the area to go to the restroom. He will point you in the right direction. Please do not just walk out into an area where you are unauthorized to be without first making staff aware of your needs. If you have a question, ask your Group Leader

Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name together. (Psalm 34:3)