



WHAT HAPPENS AFTER RELEASE?

by Don Sommer

Ministry among inmates is tremendously rewarding but it can also be very difficult. When people are incarcerated they are often at the lowest point in their lives and they have an openness to the gospel not found under normal circumstances. Since the vast majority of prisoners have substance abuse problems, which are usually the reason for their incarceration, they face unique challenges upon release, and they are extremely prone to start using drugs or drinking again when they are out of prison. During the Bible studies I teach I remind the inmates that every human being has a problem with sin but it manifests itself in different ways. We need to be aware, as believers, of those areas in which we are vulnerable to fall back into sinful patterns. For those with drug and alcohol addictions, they need to be aware of the situations that create the desire to start using the substances again.

There are over 2.3 million inmates in the United States, most of whom are serving sentences of less than 10 years and 85% have drug or alcohol addictions. That means that tens of thousands of people are being released back onto the streets of our country every year, in most cases with very few resources readily available to them to keep them from returning to the same circumstances that landed them in prison in the first place. This is the point at which the Body of Christ can step in and provide guidance and accountability for former inmates and help them integrate back into society and live out their faith beyond the prison walls.

Prison Mission Association strives to be a resource for inmates after release to help them continue in their Christian walk and provide guidance so they can avoid the pitfalls that so often send offenders back into the criminal justice system.

Statistics show that there are a number of important factors that determine the likelihood that an inmate will reoffend and return to prison. It is well documented that inmates that are actively involved in Bible study and Christian ministry while in prison have significantly lower recidi-

vism rates (the rate at which inmates recommit crimes and return to prison) than those who are not involved in such ministries. Inmates that participate in educational and job training programs also have lower recidivism rates. Typically inmates that are involved in prison ministries are getting an education as well, since if they are serious about rehabilitation they are

often looking for every opportunity made available to them.

After release there are three primary factors that are indicative of an inmate's likelihood to remain out of prison. These are the availability of permanent housing, employment, and the quality of the relationships the inmate has. PMA is limited in what we can do to help inmates with the first two areas of concern; at most we can direct them to services in their communities that we find on the Internet which assist released offenders with these issues.

The area of relationships is one which PMA tries to give special attention, as we believe it is where we can have the greatest impact. The primary relationships that most people have are with their families. However, oftentimes inmates are estranged from family members or their families are so dysfunctional that they are a negative influence on the former prisoner. When the fam-

ily is present and able and willing to help we encourage former inmates to be closely connected to them, but we also always encourage inmates upon release to become active in a local church. The local church is where relationships are formed that will promote and model a Christ-like lifestyle. The local church also provides a network of accountability in which concerned people are observing the behavior patterns of the inmate and are prepared to intervene and offer assistance when necessary. Furthermore, the church provides opportunities for ministry so that the released inmate is able to be a contributing member of the Body of Christ and to exercise his gifts and talents for the glory of God.

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KAREN'S KORNER

Knowing God—A necessity in life on this earth.

I believe it's not really enough to "know God" but we need to seek to know Him better. Seeking God gives us the desire to be like Him. So what do I know about God? I know He is kind, just and righteous (Jeremiah 9:24). Then, no doubt, the better I know God the more I can become like Him. God shows kindness, I show kindness. When I want to be more confident, I discover God is in control. Then I don't panic my way through life. I want to be like my heavenly Father. And in order to be like Him I need to get to know Him better.

Knowing God also reveals the truth about myself. As I experience, encounter and examine the Lord God, I discover He is Holy and I'm unholy. That's good information for me to know. I discover He is perfect and I'm imperfect. He is strong and I'm weak. He's patient and I'm impatient. Do I see the pattern here?



At PMA we faithfully give out the Word of God through our lessons. But the Bible is not an end in itself, but a means to bring men and women to an intimate and satisfying knowledge of God. A.W. Tozer says, "It is not mere words that nourish the soul, but God Himself." How wonderful it is then, that these men and women may delight in God's presence and know the inner sweetness of God, Himself. I wish you could sit in my chair and read all the comments how prisoners have been truly blessed by God in their cells.

Here are a few actual testimonies pertaining to prisoner responses after completing their studies.

"I have had an enlightening moment that has made me rethink my membership in the Mormon Church, thanks in a large part to these studies. Thank you." D.

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Reaching Out by Reaching In

Editor's Note: The following report comes from Marilyn Adams of Ashtabula, Ohio who has a personal Bible Correspondence Fellowship Ministry, supported by the First Grace Gospel Church for more than 20 years.



Marilyn Adams grades lessons from inmate and non-inmate students for her BCF ministry

Joe and Ada Mason visited our church over 20 years ago, presenting Prison Mission Association. They shared the need for directors to establish local branches to handle Bible studies. When our children were young I had wanted more systematic Bible study and I personally found the courses valuable when I completed them. I volunteered to start a Bible Correspondence Fellowship branch, and was glad our church Board of Elders voted to underwrite all expenses.

I thank the Lord for the opportunity to be involved these many years. One of our own children has completed the course, and also a number of our church family, who have found them a real help in their spiritual growth. One of our members offers children's Bible studies by mail.

For years, BCF cards have been featured at yearly literature tables at local fairs here in Ashtabula County. Every year, new students enroll---a barometer of the existing hunger to better understand God's Word through the studies. I'm so thankful to be involved in this

important ministry! Currently, enrollment through our BCF office is evenly divided between the general population and those in prison.

Shelton Revival Update



The annual revival sponsored by Prison Mission Association held at the Washington Corrections Center in Shelton was held on July 18-20. Although we were requested by the facility to scale back the size of the event due to the additional workload it brought to the staff, still approximately 80% of inmates in the facility attended the events. There were 149 decisions recorded with several opportunities during the weekend to minister one on one with various individuals.

Two groups worked in separate areas of the prison on

Friday and Saturday performing music and challenging the inmates with testimonies of how Jesus Christ changed their lives. In one section of the prison with three separate units we were joined by the New Life Prison Ministry out of Everett, Washington. In the other section with five units, the three person band, Echoes of Creation, performed. The inmates were blessed and challenged by the words of Pastor Ken Bussell, who found Christ while incarcerated more than ten years ago.

On Sunday a group of ten volunteers went in to conduct

seven separate chapel services. As in the past, the one hour chapel times were divided into times of praise and worship, the testimony of a former Shelton inmate and small group Bible study. The experience was tremendous as it provided an opportunity for our volunteers to spend quality ministry time with the inmates.

We look forward to an upcoming event similar to the Shelton Revival to be held October 11-12 at the Airway Heights Correctional Facility near Spokane, Washington. Please be in prayer for these activities.

Prison Mission Association is committed to providing information to friends and supporters to help them better understand the causes for incarceration in our society. It has been pointed out many times in *PMA Outreach* that drug and alcohol abuse are behind the vast majority of crimes committed in the United States. An important link has been added to the PMA website to a publication from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency describing the danger of drug use and the need for enforcement of drug laws in our country.

**To read this important information go to:
www.pmabcf.org and click on the link
 Speaking out Against Drug Legalization**

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The importance of maintaining involvement with the lives of released inmates can be seen in three examples of men who have had successful reentries to life on the outside and have been helped through close follow-up and the encouragement of other believers.

David served more than two years in a county jail for alcohol related charges. During that time he became involved in Bible studies and committed his life to Christ. Upon release he was sentenced to very strict probation requirements, which if he violated in the smallest way would result in his reincarceration. He maintained a close relationship with the people that came into the jail for ministry and allowed them to contact him on a regular basis. After a year and a half he has met all of his probation requirements and is working and attending church. He still calls the people that worked with him in jail to keep in touch and let them know how he is doing.

Toby spent over a year in jail before he was able to be released on a bond. Although he had been saved for 10 years he had not yielded his life to Christ to allow Him to do a work of transformation. While in jail he did that, and he participated in every ministry activity available in the jail. After release he immediately started looking for a church to attend. He was able to find work, get custody of his children, find a good place to stay and has recently joined a church. He too has remained in close contact with those that ministered to him in the jail.

John was saved while in the county jail and like the other two became very involved in Bible study programs while incarcerated there. He was given a seven and a half year sentence in prison. During his time in the state prisons he continued to grow in his relationship with the Lord and lived a godly life in front of the prison employees and other inmates. He earned a bachelor's degree and provided counsel and guidance to many other younger believers. After serving five years of his sentence he went before the original judge that sentenced him and his sentence was modified and he was released. He is now living at a Christian ministry house that provides a biblically based drug and alcohol recovery program. He is men-

toring the other men in the program and modeling a successfully recovered life through the power of God's Spirit.

These three individuals clearly demonstrate how lives can be transformed when we conform our will to that of the Lord. Each one has at least two things in common: they became deeply involved in learning about their faith and committing themselves to living for the Lord while incarcerated and then they were followed up by concerned individuals when they were released. This emphasizes the importance of the local church being a part of the reentry process that helps released inmates adjust back to life outside of prison.

There are certain guidelines that local churches should follow if they wish to have a successful ministry to released inmates.

Suggestions for churches that have ministry to released inmates:

- Welcome inmates
- Don't ask, let them tell about their crime and life in prison
- Don't allow them to take advantage of you
- Be aware of the unique challenges they face
- Work them gradually into ministry.

Be Welcoming

One of the main reasons that inmates don't become involved in local churches is that congregations are often-times unwelcoming. When former prisoners walk into a church for the first time they are entering an environment that is very different from what they are used to. Their dress and appearance may not be up to the same standards of typical churchgoers. Congregations are frequently apprehensive when people walk into their church that look different than they do. As congregations we need to be willing to overlook what we see on the outside and focus on the individuals' heart to love and serve God and thus make them know they are welcome to join in worship and be an involved part of the church.

Don't Ask About Their Past

Most people have certain things about their past that they don't want others to know and about which we have no obligation to tell anyone else. This is especially true for Christians, who know that we have been washed, sanctified and justified by the blood of our precious Savior. After a person has served time in jail or prison he has been sufficiently punished for his crime. Although the legal accounts are a matter of public record, someone's past mistakes should not be held against him by the church. In some cases it may be necessary for the leadership of the church to be aware of a person's record with regard to certain types of crimes, such as sex offenses, or whether or not there are restrictions an individual's contact with other people. Finding out that information should be the responsibility of the pastor or other leaders in the church and shared on a need to know basis.

Many times former inmates are willing to open up and discuss their history, but this should happen only at the individual's discretion, and to the extent that he feels comfortable.

Don't Let the Congregation Be Taken Advantage of.

There are a many people, some former inmates and others not, that intentionally seek out churches for the purpose of taking advantage of the peoples' generosity and goodwill. Others may not have ill intentions initially, but if they fall back into self-destructive patterns of drug or alcohol abuse they may begin trying to get money from people in the congregation using phony stories of financial needs they claim to have.

To avoid being the victim of scam it is best to designate a person within the congregation that is both compassionate and understanding, but also wise and tough that can screen the legitimacy of the needs for which people seek assistance.

Be Aware of the Unique Challenges They Face

When a person is released to the streets from incarceration he or she faces a host of difficulties that most of us are completely unfamiliar with. The most dangerous and difficult problem that most former inmates have to deal with is the temptation to return to drugs or alcohol. At every turn they are reminded that the substances are

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THE SPANISH SIDE



This report comes from Arnie and Sally Selfors who direct the Spanish speaking ministry of Prison Mission Association. They live in Largo, Florida and Arnie ministers weekly at the Pinellas County Jail to around 50 inmates.

Below is a letter translated from one Spanish speaking BCF student.

Dear brothers in Christ of the Bible Correspondence Fellowship:

Thank you for your great love for ME (as if I were the ONLY one to whom you extend your love and kindness, we know there are many more like me!) I thank you from the bottom of my heart and I remember you all in prayer as you help SO many people. May many of the students be saved and come to know the Truth.

Brethren, God has so richly blessed me with His Word through the lessons you send. Before I came to know Christ, I was living such an uncontrolled life, without Christ, and living in disobedience. I was like the "lost prodigal son." Spiritually I was dead. Now, even though I am physically incarcerated, I am FREE spiritually and rejoicing in God my Father and Christ my Savior. He is the one who took my place on the Cross of Calvary, paying God's demand and price for my sin and that of the whole world. Why did He love me so? I praise Him that Christ died in my place and has given me this opportunity to know Him and know the Truth. Because of this, John 8:32 tells me that knowing the Truth will set me free.

Thanks again for permitting me to study His Word through the guiding of your lessons. Many of us here praise Him for you all "out there."

Your brother in Christ, Benito Ramirez Secundino.

GOD'S PERSPECTIVE

But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. Galatians 3:22 (NIV)

but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. Romans 7:23

These two verses show how prison is a metaphor for sin in the Bible. Another similar analogy to describe man's condition outside of Christ is that of slavery. In both cases it speaks of being in a state of involuntary bondage to powers which are beyond our control. Each situation speaks of hopelessness and powerlessness. The prisoner and the slave have no control of their own destiny but are at the mercy of the force that keeps them in bondage. Humans are bound by the power that sin has over our souls so that nothing we can do in our own power can release us from that bondage.

This however, is not the end of the story. The Bible speaks of the gospel as having the power to free the imprisoned and enslaved soul and allow him to burst forth with freedom and liberty.

Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. Galatians 5:1

The picture we find is that of a slave being bought back from slavery and the prison doors bursting open and the prisoner being free to run out of the dungeon that has kept him bound. When I speak to men that have been addicted to the sinfulness of this world the description they give is always that of being a slave; whether to drugs, alcohol, wealth, control, sex or whatever type of evil behavior one can imagine. This bondage is not just from evil behaviors but the Bible describes those that are seeking to be accepted by God through their own righteousness as being prisoners to the law (or good works). In other words the individual that believes his personal effort can earn him favor with God is as much of a prisoner to that way of thinking as the pathetic heroine addict stealing to support his destructive habit. Such a person will always feel he is insufficient and be burdened that he does not meet up to the perfect demands of God. As Romans chapters 1 and 2 teaches us, whether it is someone living in the depths of moral depravity or trusting in their personal religiosity, all are prisoners of sin and are granted freedom through faith in the work of Christ to pay the penalty for our shortcomings.



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readily available and when the burdens of life are seemingly overbearing, they are drawn to the sense of temporary escape provided by the chemical substances.

Another serious challenge is that in many cases the most human relationships that any of us can have, our close family members, are part of their problem. Commonly, parents, siblings and sometimes even children have themselves been incarcerated and cannot be counted on to provide the nurture, support or positive role models that are needed to make wise life choices.

Furthermore, released inmates face difficulties because of the stigma of having a criminal record. It becomes much more difficult to find a job and decent housing. If an inmate is released on parole or probation they face the challenge of working within that system so as not to violate the conditions put on them and be reimprisoned (in some cases it can be so strict that a person whose car breaks down on the way to a probation report and fails to show can be charged with attempted escape). All of these issues add to the already difficult pressures of normal life

and can sometime cause former inmates to become depressed and despondent. Those in the church that minister to these people should be aware of the unique problems they face in their attempt to walk with the Lord according to His will.

Work Them Gradually into Ministry

In order to completely fulfill God's Will in our lives we need to be using the spiritual gifts that God has given us for ministry. The same holds true for released inmates. In many cases they had valuable spiritual ministry while incarcerated. When a former prisoner enters the church they should be encouraged to become involved in the service and outreach programs of the church, and be gradually given opportunity to serve with their responsibilities increasing as they demonstrate their level of commitment and faithfulness.

One of the greatest factors in reducing recidivism among released inmates is the ability for them to form meaningful positive relationships on the outside. There is no better place for them to do this than through the local church. The church is God's ordained

institution to provide guidance, support, accountability and opportunity for service. Our churches need to be committed to helping the former inmates that the Lord brings our way and to pointing them in the right direction and then walking alongside them, to help pick them up when they stumble.

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Leonard writes, "This lesson brought electricity to me. It made me reread and fully feel the Lord, His Holy Spirit, in me. I felt its quickness and now I'm wanting to experience His power."

Knowing God and who He is gives me confidence, boldness in His presence. In Philippians 3:12-14, Paul talks about having no confidence in the flesh, but pressing on toward the goal—"forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead...the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." How about you? Are you seeking to know God better?

Karen