

Supporting Our Church Members and Families Involved with the Criminal Justice System

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While each personal situation and congregation is unique, Christ offers us guidance and hope. Some actions we can take to serve one person or one family:

- Listen to and love the victim or incarcerated individual and their family members; not be afraid to be caring and an open ear.
- Pray for the individual and their loved ones; and not be afraid to ask, “What would you like prayers for?”
- Family members often feel shame and may not want it known; promise confidentiality; encourage them to say what is on their hearts and allow Christ and Christ’s followers to respond.
- Accept in our hearts and minds that we all sin and that Christ died for our sins so we can be redeemed. Christ ministered to people judged harshly by society, not shunned them. 97% of people sent to prison are released some day. How shall we respond?
- Recognize that injustice is inherent to the criminal justice system, such as: wealth and legal representation; overloading charges in order to get plea deals; racial discrimination in stopping, arresting, convicting, and sentencing; and overuse of solitary confinement.

Examples of ways to serve church members and families:

Identify individuals and groups in your church who may have a heart for serving an individual affected by criminal justice and their family. Ask them to consider one or more ways to serve others.

Accompany a victim or arrestee to meetings or hearings. Be present in their difficult circumstances.

In Sunday worship, include a prayer or song of concern or hope, e.g., David, author of many psalms was an adulterer and murderer.

Encourage adult women who have a loved one who is incarcerated to apply for a Kairos Outside weekend. No cost and transportation is provided. A faith-filled weekend of listening and caring in a safe and confidential environment. Contact aorie01komd@gmail.com

Encourage adults who have a family member who is incarcerated to have mediation sessions in the prison to address issues, hopes, and concerns related to release from prison in the coming 6-18 months. No cost and transportation may be provided. <http://re-entrymediation.org/>

Write a letter of care and encouragement to a victim or incarcerated person, even if you don’t know the person personally. Greeting cards usually not allowed. DC: <https://>

doc.dc.gov/page/send-letter For MD and DC, find out inmate #, etc. at <http://www.thefreeinmatelocator.com/how-to-write-an-inmate.html>

Stress the importance of knowing release date from prison, so you can prepare to welcome the person with open arms. Offer to drive to probation office, find clothes, etc. Also serve people in your congregation with past criminal records.

Drive and accompany a victim or returning citizen to worship and regular small groups.

Visit, call, or txt words of encouragement (victims and returning citizens).

Help by identifying resources in the community to help with housing, job hunting, clothes, food, transportation, mental health, and addiction recovery. Also consider how your church can support or partner with nonprofits, agencies, and other churches. <http://www.bwcumc.org/ministries/advocacy-action/criminal-justice-and-mercy-ministries/>

Learn about being a mentor or accountability partner. <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/resources/training-resources/mentoring-ministry/>

Serve the children and other relatives of someone incarcerated. Don't speak badly of the incarcerated person. Help with needs for prayer, an accepting ear, encouragement, and resources. Provide transportation for family to visit at prison. <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/resources/support-friends-family-of-prisoners/>

Send comments and suggestions, or receive updates: mtipperman@gmail.com