

New Life UPC
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National CPM Conference
“From an Inmate to a Disciple”
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Note: The notes from this lesson were compiled with the assistance of Rev. James Noe, MI District CPM Committee Member

Colossians 1:28 (NIV)

“He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.”

Key Point! Prison ministry, like all ministries, is not a single event but a process. The Church is called to make disciples, not simply converts. And that takes time.

Evangelism, discipleship, and preparing for release are all required to disciple incarcerated men and women. These ministries help new Christians become rooted in Christ, grounded in His Word, and equipped to live a new life in the community.

Matthew 28:19 (ERV)

19 So go and make followers of all people in the world. Baptize them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Prisoners are regularly transferred from institution to institution. And whenever that happens there is the potential for believers to be disconnected from ministry.

If the Church is to effectively disciple prisoners in the midst of a system that moves them around, it is important that we learn to be nimble in serving them wherever they may be sent. It is important to gather their contact information prior to their transfer.

From an Inmate to a Disciple

1. What DRAW's inmates?

Initially, it's not doctrine. Several elements should be present to best create long-term discipleship.

- A.** Personal connection with church member. Think of this as mentorship, and a person the former inmate feels a closeness to
- B.** The feeling that they can contribute to the church quickly; these are men who often

don't feel their opinion is valuable, or don't feel that they have meaningfully contributed to society. Showing them a road to ministry and quickly showing appreciation for their contribution and opinions helps them feel valued. Create a written strategy with events specifically aimed at former inmates and deepening their walk.

C. Knowledge that they need outside help if they really want to change. Inmates may not understand exactly how much they need Jesus, nor the difference He can make in their lives. But they may recognize that their previous "system" didn't work, and know they need a new one. Show them how the Gospel can improve their chances of success and how it is the best path to: sobriety/happiness/peace, etc. Basically--whatever their problem, the Gospel is the answer.

D. Make sure you can help them put the past behind them. No inmate wants to walk into a church where they feel condemnation or shame. Be careful how you introduce visitors: "This is my friend, James," is a lot better than "James is visiting us for the first time from the jail."

E. Create classes inmates will find helpful: anger management, dealing with substance use disorder, technology proficiency, job seeking seminars--these are functional and make the church a destination.

F. Edify the Pastor while still in the jail/prison. Publicly thank the pastor for his vision and support of jail ministry, ministry worker should share personal examples of how the pastor has enriched or guided them in their own journey. As workers in the jail, we are NOT their pastor, although they may see us as such--the measure of long-term success is to connect them to the local church's pastor on their release. This is made much easier if they have heard positive commentary regarding the church's pastor for the last year.

2. What helps RETAIN former inmates?

A. Many of the elements above.

B. Reiterate--over and over--the need to gather with other believers consistently to have success as a Christian AND as someone changing their habits. I often ask inmates, "How many of you regularly attended church growing up?" and I would guess the number is around 70%. Many of them may already consider themselves "Christian" despite having no real relationship with Christ, desire for holiness, understanding of the Word, etc. Many inmates have voiced that "they are Christian and know they need to just stop hanging around with certain people." They emphasize what they need to STOP doing, but lack vision about what they should START doing, and who they will replace their formerly unproductive relationships with.

C. Begin to teach in-depth Bible studies. Make the transition from former inmate to simply "Christian." It's important to teach them the way we would any other new convert--Search for Truth, Exploring God's Word, Acorn to an Oak--all good Bible studies meant to teach doctrine and differentiate Truth from previous knowledge they may have.

D. Broaden connections to other saints. The more points of contact a former inmate has within the church, the more likely he/she will be to stay in church. Contacts must move beyond the jail ministry team and include the pastor, solid saints, and others who may teach doctrinal courses, fellowship, etc.

3. Create DISCIPLES

A. If inmates are drawn, retained, and taught well, they will become productive disciples themselves. But this begins while incarcerated. We can't expect to win them once they're out of jail.

B. Create small attainable goals for them to evangelize their contacts: "You have come so far and learned so much. Think about how good it's going to feel when the first person you bring to church is baptized and their sins are washed away. See if you can find ONE person to come with you."

C. Determine if there are any tools necessary to help them succeed--different people need different resources to help them be effective. Make sure they are equipped--with knowledge, resources, etc. to help them be effective in ministry.

Any questions???