

Re-Entry Outreach - Prison Ministry

LIVING ON THE OUTSIDE: When inmates complete their sentences and are ready to live on the outside again, it is called reentry or reintegration. The goal is their successful transition into the community. All too often they are released with little or no money to obtain shelter and food, and with just the clothes on their backs. Many without families have no place to go and are forced to live on the street. Most are eager to find work and begin living normally, but jobs are difficult for those just released from prison. Those convicted of sex offenses find it even harder to reintegrate because they are labeled and restricted as to where they can live.

THE RISK OF RECIDIVISM: Unless ex-inmates have a realistic plan and adequate support from others once they "hit the street" they are at risk of returning to prison.

WHAT EX-INMATES NEED: The women and men who return to the community after serving time may encounter numerous challenges. They need help with clothing, housing, employment, transportation, child care, health care, managing finances, interpersonal skills, counseling, drug and alcohol rehab and the support of a caring, spiritual community. In fact, belonging to a faith community is an important tie that can bind all of the needs and concerns of ex-inmates into success rather than repeated failure.

THE ROLE OF THE FAITH COMMUNITY: Members of the faith community can play a crucial role in helping ex-inmates. During their incarceration they experienced loneliness, isolation, rejection by society and a lack of self-worth. A welcoming and non-judgmental faith community can help ex-inmates cope with emotional aftermath of these experiences by offering hope through practical assistance, restoring trust through genuine friendship and healing of spiritual and emotional wounds.

TWO-WAY LEARNING: The membership of an ex-inmate in a local church has a direct effect on them because it prepares the members of the church for the next ex-offender who might wish to join them. By extending fellowship and assistance, the faith community grows as it discovers its own spiritual gifts. It learns the joy and challenge of having an open mind and heart, as it puts the ideals of the gospel to the test. It is called to make forgiveness and education a more visible part of the church's social justice outreach.

MENTORING: Mentors (or a mentoring group) take support one step further by offering practical assistance. They assist ex-inmates during their adjustment period by listening to them, encouraging and advising them. Since many ex-inmates come from broken homes and have experienced abuse and injustice themselves, they need help with personal skills. Being a stable force by providing a good example is very important. Mentors also can open doors that lead to jobs, counseling and other practical support that spell the difference between success or failure. They can assist ex-inmates with identifying a new job, providing them with transportation to interviews, obtaining a driver's license, finding a place to live, getting terms with their parole officers.

NETWORKING: Going it alone is rarely a good idea and does not generate success in the long run. It is extremely important that representatives of the various faith-based organizations, departments of state and local government, and community resources ally themselves in the common goal of successful reintegration. A wide range of formal and informal partnerships ensures that no one bears the responsibility of serving these vulnerable, at-risk members of our community. The conversations of this network can center on how to support efforts that may already be under way. As this network of churches and community organizations grows, its members draw from their experiences. They may establish a structure of paid or volunteer staff to create links between community and faith-based organizations, and to coordinate the efforts of those willing to work on issues of community justice, reentry and training of ex-inmates.