

THE WELCOME DIRECTORY



BEYOND THE PRISON GATES

So what do you think about people leaving prison? Prisons and prisoners can seem like a mystery due to the fact that much of their sentence happens in a secure facility. Many of our ideas about prison and prisoners are learnt from films or opinion pieces in newspapers; many of these views can be outdated or unhelpful. Unless we have experienced it ourselves then it is hard to understand the consequences of a prison sentence.

This first session will introduce you to themes, ideas and information that will hopefully lead to a greater understanding of the issues surrounding imprisonment and release.

2016 VERSION



SESSION ONE

Session one facilitator notes: beyond the prison gates

Welcome here. This first session is mostly activity based and has been designed to create space for focused conversations. By the end of this session you will:

- Be equipped with useful information and have a deeper appreciation of the subject.
- Have explored attitudes towards prison and prisoners and thought about the scale and nature of the problems surrounding resettlement.
- Have considered the opportunities you have to get involved and be a part of a compassionate response.

Starting place

This first exercise records your starting place. Each person will come to this group from a different place and will bring with them different attitudes and ideas which have been picked up from a variety of sources. Begin by becoming aware of where you are at. Allow your mind to bring some of your thoughts and feelings about this subject to the surface, recognising that it can often be very hard to voice your thoughts.

Spend up to five minutes responding to the following question. You might want to write words, draw pictures, doodle or create a mind map to mark your starting place. Whatever is meaningful to you, use the time and space to record where you are at now.

When you hear the word “prison” or “prisoner” what thoughts, words, pictures or phrases come to mind?

Once you have captured your thoughts and feelings, if you are able to, share your responses with the group. Spend up to ten minutes as a group listening to one another.

Everything changes at the prison gates

In order to understand the reason why the Welcome Directory exists, it is important to appreciate the following figures and the problems they highlight. The following figures are not official statistics but are instead an approximation based upon the records kept by prison chaplains and upon their day-to-day experience.

"Approximately 80,000 men, women, and unfortunately children are released from prison every year". John Podmore¹

Approximately 15% of our prison population attends worship of some kind every week whether Juma prayers, RC Mass, Reasoning sessions, CofE Communion, Sikh Worship or the worship and rituals of other traditions. To understand the scale of this, imagine that

¹ John Podmore is professor of applied social sciences at the University of Durham, freelance criminal justice consultant and former prison governor. The quote is taken from an interview on *Start of the Week* with Andrew Marr - Radio 4, 23rd January 2012.

worshippers are evenly distributed amongst the 80,000 prisoners who are released every year. Approximately 12,000 people who worship whilst in prison are released every year. Distributed across a year, about 1000 people every month who have been practicing their faith and beliefs with chaplains. Every week 250 people will be released who have been involved with chaplaincy activities in some way.

Let's be generous and say that 20% of those released who have worshiped in some way in prison go on to join a faith community upon release. Then we have 200 people who we know are worshipping or involved in chaplaincy led activities this week who will not be involved with a faith community next week!

People who feel it is important to identify themselves with a faith community, whose attitudes, thinking and behaviour have been shaped by a positive group, but who do not have that same influence following release. That is a huge loss for everyone.

There are many people every year who leave a prison who might find welcome, acceptance and meaning as a participating member of our faith communities.

So what is going on here? Why is this happening? We believe that being part of a faith community is a healthy, positive, some might even say life changing experience. Why do prisoners walking through the gates not always join us?

Spend five minutes having a conversation as a group about some of the reasons why prisoners might struggle to join a faith community beyond prison. Let the facilitator bring the conversation to a natural conclusion.

Understanding the background of many prisoners

As we work through this session, it is important to remember that behind the statistics are stories. Every number represents a different person with a story and hopes for a better future. Sadly, many prisoners have difficult stories to tell and when you look at their experiences as a whole, various themes start to emerge. Perhaps some of the figures and themes in this activity will surprise you, perhaps they won't. But the picture that the following research portrays will give you an insight into the profile of many of the people who make up our prison population.

Spend up to five minutes studying the Prisoner Factsheet on your own.

What stands out to you? What impacts you? What surprises you?

Try to put yourself in the shoes of a prisoner and explore some of the challenges you might face in prison and upon release.

Have a conversation as a group. The conversation might last for a while, let the facilitator bring things to a natural conclusion.

What does your faith or beliefs have to say?

Each of us has a way of describing our faith or the beliefs that guide and shape our lives; words and concepts that express the substance of our faith and beliefs and the difference it makes to our everyday lives. What do we believe? Why? How do love and compassion, justice and mercy express themselves in our daily lives? What does our faith say to the prisoner? What does our faith compel, even require us to do for vulnerable people who are struggling with insurmountable challenges? How does our faith shape our response to those who are released from prison with little money and few job prospects? How can we help the one person who might seek help and friendship in our faith community? These are tough questions and should be on our mind in the weeks that follow. Every community will give different answers. However, it is important to spend some time exploring our faith in relation to the realities of life in prison and the challenges of resettlement afterwards.

Have a conversation about your faith or beliefs and its response to those who are imprisoned, particularly those who have finished or are about to finish their time of incarceration. Spend 10-15 minutes exploring this together. Let the facilitator bring things to a conclusion and then move on.

Themes might include: love, repentance, reconciliation, rebirth, redemption, mercy, compassion, values, virtues, trust, hope, solidarity, stories from our tradition...

What can faith communities do?

We are not going to fully answer the question: *What can faith communities do?* right now, but it is important to begin to introduce some of the themes that have been shown to make a positive difference in resettlement. Some people may question the place of faith communities being directly involved in helping people leaving prison to resettle, thinking that it is better to leave things to 'professional agencies'. However, recent research shows the very positive difference that faith communities can make.

The worksheet includes a very condensed version of Dr Ruth Armstrong's PhD² which is an account of life after prison for 48 men who were involved in a faith-based prison programme in America. The thesis has been summarised into ten key words with a brief explanation that unpacks each word in turn. These ten words begin to highlight some of the important themes that our faith community will need to think about as we prepare to welcome people leaving prison.

Spend five minutes studying the ten words.

² Dr Ruth Armstrong is a criminologist based at the Cambridge Institute of Criminology and her thesis focused upon the role of a faith based programme in America and the impact it had in the lives of 48 people who left prison.

Spend 10-15 minutes discussing your thoughts in response to these questions: What stands out for you? What encourages you? What surprises you? What is your faith community already doing that is on that list? What could it do better? Let the facilitator bring things to a conclusion.

To think about this week

Between this session and the next one, when you will visit a prison, take some time to meditate upon what you have learnt in this first session. Try and think through some of the difficulties that you might encounter if you were released from prison. Imagine some of the challenges and attitudes that you might meet. How might you explain the gap in your work history? How would you feel about meeting family and friends again? What would you look for in a faith community?

To read before session two

Ask everyone to read the preparation leaflet that will give more information about the role of prison chaplains, the reason for sentencing and the background of some of the people you might meet at the prison when you visit.

Ensure that everyone has a copy of the preparation leaflet to read before session two.

Conclusion

We have reached the end of the first session and have covered a lot of ground together. Whatever your starting place, you will have hopefully been stimulated, challenged, inspired, encouraged and informed by the material. At the heart of the Welcome Directory is faith and belief and how faith and convictions can inspire us to welcome and support those who might be seeking help during difficult and uncertain times.

As we have discovered together, there are many reasons why those leaving prison with faith might find it difficult to attend a faith community upon release; wondering whether they will find acceptance and welcome, a place to belong and grow? Whether people will be open to someone who has spent time in prison or whether they will be politely told to leave with actual words or by their body language? Perhaps as we have learnt, prisoners cannot physically attend worship due to the many demands and restrictions placed upon them. Hopefully the material in this session has given us a new awareness and a desire to get involved in a positive way that makes a real and lasting difference.