

Six Rules of Thumb for Prison Ministry: Advice for Pastors and Ministry Leaders

by [the Rev. Dr. Sandra S. Jenkins](#)

Some years back, a group of individuals from a church decided to form a prison ministry team. With heartfelt good intentions, they created a list of the members' skills and ran it by their pastor. Next, they took it to a chaplain at the nearby prison where they were hoping to serve. The list focused on the *special gifts* they could contribute to inmate well-being, such as Bible study, exercises, arts and crafts related to the studies, and so on. In addition, this group offered to donate crosses, religious books, Bibles, workbooks on how to read the Bible, and handouts for inmates to color or decorate.

What is wrong with this picture? This type of planning might work well for a ministry within a congregation, but when approaching a prison – or other institution, for that matter – leaders must first find out what is actually needed.

First Rule of Thumb: Never Assume

One of the worst things well-intended churches can do is to presume that their own agenda of *services* will work in a prison without first asking *what the prison actually needs*. After all, prison ministry assumes service to God foremost. The first task of the ministry group is to build trust, both with the prison administration and with the inmates to whom they are assigned. As the chaplain and administrators observe the work of your team enriching the lives of inmates and developing relationships, they can ascertain what other projects are best suited for your group and decide the best direction for your ministry as a whole.

Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you saying, this person began to build and wasn't able to finish. (Luke 14: 28-30, New International Version).¹

Second Rule of Thumb: Consider Your Role and Responsibilities

Take time for personal reflection on prison ministry, especially if you are not accustomed to setting aside your own agendas. Consider the following questions carefully, both individually and with your group, **BEFORE** starting to form a prison ministry:

1. How well do I really understand prison systems and culture? Have I already made assumptions and judgments that I may need to question?
2. Do I understand how important it is to be covered appropriately in prayer before entering a prison?
3. How willing am I to ask for help and power from the Holy Spirit to avoid the pitfalls of flaunting my own agenda?
4. When was the last time I truly confessed my own sins to God and others?
5. Am I willing and able to ask for forgiveness for those sins, thoughts, and past judgments; and am I

0. humble and teachable enough to allow God to remove my defects?
6. How well do I *let go and let God* in most situations?
7. Can I truly listen to and love all inmates unconditionally — even child molesters, murderers, or rapists?
8. Will I have difficulty refraining from asking details about an inmate's particular crimes, especially when driven by assumptions about him/her or negative feelings?
9. Am I able to help a rapist, murderer or any other type of sinner (in prison or not) feel as special as my other church brothers and sisters?
10. Can I look a prisoner in the eye and truly smile at him or her?
11. When speaking one-on-one with an inmate, can I listen to him or her as if s/he is the most important one in the room?
12. How willing am I to allow an inmate to pray God's will over me?
13. Am I truly ready to love the prisoner through God's love in me?
14. In what ways am I unprepared for this ministry, and how will I get ready?

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. ([Colossians 3:16-17](#), English Standard Version)²

Third Rule of Thumb: Focus on the Bigger Picture

Sometimes ministry teams become frustrated, feel inadequate, and may even get a false sense that they are unwanted just because their suggestions and donations are not accepted. At this point, take a step back and look at the bigger picture. Here are just a few of the reasons why it may not be suitable to bring certain materials into a prison:

1. *Crosses* – Inmates generally must select one cross (in some prisons two) as part of their personal property. If the inmate truly enjoys your program, she /he may have to sacrifice a cross (perhaps a special sentimental one gifted by a relative) in order to keep yours. In fact, an inmate may choose to sacrifice his or her special cross because s/he is afraid you will not accept him or her, or may even sense she/he could offend you somehow because she/he cannot accept your gift. The worst part is that the inmate will never tell you any of this.
2. *Religious materials* – Religious materials are also analogous to personal property. That is, having too many books or materials can stir up jealousy among inmates or even raise concern that the inmate's personal property (including the religious possessions) could be confiscated permanently. At that point, the inmate would have to choose between a number of items very carefully and surrender property *that may be very personal to him or her*.

For example, an inmate had to surrender a personal family Bible to receive another Bible from a ministering group. He was afraid that if he did not take the Bible offered him, the ministry might reject him, and that group had become very important to him. He sent the personal Bible home to his family. Unfortunately, the family took offense, and the inmate endured about two months without visits from his loved ones. Later, after much help from the chaplain, the conflict was resolved; and the family resumed visiting him.

You can avoid causing incidents like these simply by trying to see another side of the decision-making process in prisons. I don't mean to imply that the prison staff are always correct, or that the inmate is being mistreated; rather, it is best for all persons to follow the recommendations set forth by the particular prison for ministry. When you feel unsure, ask. Most prison staff members are eager to answer volunteers' questions.

3. *Clearances* – Religious books must meet the requisites of prison clearances, perhaps being purchased through an approved vendor, book distributor, or publishing house. Further, the materials *must specifically align with the intended purposes of the program* and be accompanied by the proper paperwork signed by a warden. All items must pass through intake to ensure security and safety for all.

4. *Arts and crafts* – Most prisons possess art materials, including paints, canvasses, yarn, thread, and so on, and acquire these items through specific procedures (as briefly alluded to above). That is not to suggest they are necessarily of superior quality. Inventory of all types - and art materials as well - must pass safety requirements set forth by the particular prison and its programs. For instance, paints can cause serious safety violations if not inventoried properly and stored in a secure location, or if they contain noxious materials.

Bottom line, understand that there may be good reasons for decisions you did not anticipate. When a ministry team becomes disgruntled with prison staff, rules, and programs, they may be *trying to control rather than to serve*. As a result, the team loses its spiritual impact on behalf of God's work for God's kingdom. The prison may also terminate your ministry in the prison. Follow your prison leaders, therefore, and pray for them. *You are the body of Christ in reality to most inmates as well as to the prison staff.* Being disagreeable because you cannot conduct your program as you want reflects badly on you, especially since your intention is to serve as an example of and servant to Christ. Remember that your job is to follow the system rules while leading, encouraging, and shepherding both your own team and the inmates assigned to your particular ministry.

First pride, then the crash - the bigger the ego, the harder the fall! (Proverbs 16:18, The Message)³

Fourth Rule of Thumb: Be a Leadership Model for All...Including the Pastor

A ministry leader, wherever he or she is serving, *first surrenders to God*, becoming primarily a servant. In prison ministries, as elsewhere, the litmus test for servanthood lies not in how much the leaders and team *accomplish*, but in *how much they surrender control*. Relying heavily on the Holy Spirit's guidance, the team grounds itself in prayer and willingly responds to needs by beautifully reflecting God's grace, mercy and love. As Robert Greenleaf states (1977/2002): *"The best test is: do those served grow as persons: do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived?"*

Thus it is not about what a prison team can do; rather, it is all about remaining in service to assist the chaplain in ministering to and with the inmates. Listen to the prison chaplain first, and as God prompts you with ideas for improvements, wait patiently, watch for ways you can serve, and listen for the Lord's direction as he molds your prison ministry through each step! Leave your agenda at home, seek wisdom and guidance behind the prison walls, and ask for help. You will soon discover you have more to learn than teach, at least initially.

Be still and know [recognize, understand] that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations! I will be exalted in the earth. (Psalm 46:10, Amplified Bible)⁴

Fifth Rule of Thumb: Dysfunctional Teams Can Kill Their Own Ministries

When I coach ministry teams, one of my first questions is: "How specifically have you prayed regarding the formation of your prison ministry team?" *Prayer is the heartbeat for any ministry.* Remove prayer, and I promise you a dysfunctional team built on arrogance, self-importance, pride, and competitiveness. I watched one team struggle over who would be in charge. Picking up on the conflict, the inmates suggested beginning each meeting with prayer focused on *asking God to remove the discord*. Not long after, the attitude of the ministry team changed, and they became an example of unity for the whole prison.

Through prayer, God naturally weeds out people with self-serving *instead of God-serving intentions*. When servants empty themselves and rely solely on the Holy Spirit, God can use them powerfully.

Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. (Mark 10:43-44, NIV)¹

Sixth Rule of Thumb: Avoid Judging

If Jesus were standing in front of you, how would you treat him? Are you willing to treat inmates the same way, that is, by mirroring Jesus to them? What is your real heart attitude before you serve in prison ministry, and what is it when you leave? Here are some ideas for developing a nonjudgmental attitude:

1. **Talking with God** – You may discover that an inmate has committed acts you can hardly imagine, such as murdering someone or harming a child. Before setting foot into a prison, spend serious time in conversation with God. Journal your thoughts and feelings and then share and pray over them with a close friend or pastor. These materials may help you get started:

Books written by or about prison workers and former inmates:

- [*Fallen, Felon, and Finally Faith*](#) – Dr. Ralph Reagan
- [*Life After Hell: Reflections of a Bag Lady*](#) – Dr. Sandra Jenkins
- [*Prison Ministry: Understanding Prison Culture Inside and Out*](#) – Lennie Spitale

Devotionals that include true experiences of prison life

- [*Prisoner to Prisoner*](#) – Kairos Prison Ministry International (KPMI)
- [*Jesus Calling*](#) – Sarah Young
- [*A Table in the Wilderness*](#) – Watchman Nee

2. **Examining Your Call**– A call to prison ministry can be exciting, but also very daunting or even confusing. Sometimes a person experiences a number of concerns all at once: what others might think, whether she/he is doing the right thing, if the “vocation” is based on someone else’s expectations, or even if one is mistaken about a call. A very passionate personal desire, for instance, can seem to the voice of God. In other words, the call is a serious consideration that can be easily misunderstood without some clear guidance and focus. Here are a few tips:

- Carefully meditate on what you learned through prayer and journaling above.
- Consult with someone serving in prison ministry. Learn more about some of its joys and challenges.
- Visit or meet with a prison chaplain to gain more clarity about prison ministry.

3. **No Judging or Talking Down** – I have served well over 5,000 incarcerated men, women, and youth over the past 25 years. The longing I hear inmates express most often is for a genuine spiritual home where others do not judge or talk down to them. One inmate reported hearing a preacher say, “I am delighted to assist with ex-cons just so long as they are neither sex addicts nor violent offenders.” The inmate responded, “Well, that counted me out...I committed murder. I just don’t think I can be accepted in a church – too hoity-toity for me.”

So, if Jesus were standing in front of you, how would you treat him? Can you treat any inmate the same way?

What is your real heart attitude before you attend and when you leave worship? Can you treat inmates the same way you would treat the Lord?

If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. (1 John 4:20, ESV)²

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Notes

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² [**English Standard Version**](#) (ESV)

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³ [**The Message**](#) (MSG)

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⁴ [**Amplified Bible**](#) (AMP)

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<http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/six-rules-of-thumb-for-prison-ministry>



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