



## Ministers' Fraternal Study Guides

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### How to go to prison, get out, and be welcomed back again!

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#### 1. The scope of this paper

This paper deals with considerations that Christian pastors and workers need to bear in mind in visiting prisons. When visiting to take a service or a meeting the principles also apply, plus some more! When visiting an inmate pastorally by permission of the Prison Chaplain in the chapel or chaplaincy offices the same principles apply with some changes in detail. A pastoral visitor or an invited preacher does not need to be sent a Visiting Order (VO) from a prisoner. But appreciating the reason for prison rules and etiquette will help you in situations not specifically covered in this paper.

For Prison Ministry Associates (PMAs) and Prison Ministry Visitors (PMVs) of DAYLIGHT Christian Prison Trust there are specific 'Guidelines'. Those 'Guidelines' share some common ground with the advice given in, this paper. If DAYLIGHT can help or advise you, please contact us via our website: [www.daylightcpt.org](http://www.daylightcpt.org)

#### 2. Getting into Prison

To enter prison to see an inmate either contact Prison Chaplaincy or arrange a VO though Prison Visits. See websites below for prison details in England/Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland:

[www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk/prisoninformation/locateaprison](http://www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk/prisoninformation/locateaprison)

[www.sps.gov.uk/default.aspx?documentid=4cb8fa7e-04b4-4815-b7b0-8b3bfbd35589](http://www.sps.gov.uk/default.aspx?documentid=4cb8fa7e-04b4-4815-b7b0-8b3bfbd35589)

[www.niprisonservice.gov.uk/index.cfm/area/information/page/prisonestate](http://www.niprisonservice.gov.uk/index.cfm/area/information/page/prisonestate)

Each Prison will advise on how to get your VO. Usually this is sent to you by the prisoner and you need to go at the appropriate visiting time. A Prison Chaplain is empowered to facilitate a pastoral visit for you, but it is up to each Chaplain to decide if he is able to do that. A call to the prison will be put through to Chaplaincy on request. Each Chaplaincy also has its own extension.

#### 3. Well before the visit

- Make sure by mail (VO) and by mail and through the Chaplaincy (pastoral visits) that the person you plan to visit expects you.
- Remember photo ID – passport or photo driving licence is best.
- Check parking facilities – do not leave anything in the car visible from outside in a prison car park.
- Check the time you are due at the gate and (if a pastoral visit) the name of the chaplain.
- Know how long you have. Plan covering your 'agenda' in that time – including listening time!
- Take a Bible with you – but sometimes it will not be allowed in. Some prisons have Bibles available in the visiting room. Ask an officer.

- Do not take with you to the prison a mobile phone, a large amount of money, or anything not needed. Lockers are available at many prisons.
- Make sure you have the prison phone number and address – just in case!

#### **4. Security, Security, Security**

The overriding goal of every Prison Governor is to prevent escapes. Blocking drug importation is also important to the prison. Mobile phones and cameras are extremely sensitive, forbidden items also. Your public duty is to avoid compromising these objectives. Any lapse in this area will be viewed very seriously indeed. Bear in mind that an individual's carelessness could jeopardise access for the gospel for yourself, and perhaps for others known to be associated with you. The following guidelines have been drawn up by DAYLIGHT Christian Prison Trust in consultation with senior prison security professionals:

##### **a) Pre-notification**

If a pastoral visit, arrange with the chaplain the time of arrival at the prison gate, and provide the names and ID details of anyone else authorised by him/her, in advance. In this way he can provide the gate officer with the details to facilitate your entry.

If a VO, follow the directions exactly as given to you by the prison staff.

##### **b) Identification**

The DAYLIGHT photo ID badge may suffice for PMAs or PMVs, but even they should also have a driving licence or passport available. Failure to provide ID may result in refusal of entry into the prison, and will almost certainly cause delay.

##### **c) Searching at the gate**

For pastoral visits, apart from a Bible and literature approved beforehand by the chaplain, nothing should be brought into the prison. If you need to take medication, take the absolute minimum required for the duration of the visit, and declare it to the officer on the gate. All visitors may be pat-down searched upon entry. The procedure for this is as follows:

- You will be asked if you have anything on you that you aren't supposed to have. (This includes items such as cameras, mobile phones, or any articles that could be deemed by staff to be used as a weapon.) If the searching officer asks you to place any items in a locker, please do so uncomplainingly. (You might need a pound coin to open the locker door – if so, don't forget to collect it afterwards!)
- You may be asked to empty your pockets and hold out items for inspection.
- Any bags or items you have with you will be searched.
- You may be asked to remove any bulky clothing, and the officer will check your collar from your shoulder down both sides of the arms, your shirt and down both sides of each leg. You may be asked to remove a belt for searching.
- A metal detector wand may be used as a secondary search.
- You will not normally be asked to remove your shoes, but these will be checked and you may be asked to lift the soles of your feet for examination. Sometimes you will be asked to remove shoes for searching.
- Sometimes you will be photographed, or give hand-geometry ID, or provide digital finger prints.

#### **5. Contact with prisoners**

Remember that nearly all prisoners are in prison for good reasons! If in doubt, don't!

- Always dress to a standard befitting the gospel. Impress this on any who accompany you, especially where they visit a prison for those of the opposite sex.

- Give NOTHING to any prisoner apart from (in pastoral visits) literature authorised by the chaplain, or drinks or refreshments bought from the vending machines provided. Passing any unauthorised article may be deemed to be trafficking.
- Take NOTHING from the prisoners. You are not permitted to post or carry letters on their behalf.
- Don't share personal information with unknown prisoners, or talk to them about others in detail.
- Do not use your or anyone else's personal address. Use a neutral address if you have to – e.g. the church, or a PO Box. If a prisoner wants to write to you, suggest he/she uses that address. Make sure that address is at the top of your reply – NOT YOUR HOME ADDRESS.
- The rules applying to face-to-face contact apply to written communications. Bear in mind that any letter may be opened by the Security Department – so circumspection is the order of the day! Sometimes it is good to send a letter to the inmate in an open envelope, enclosing it with a covering letter to the chaplain, and asking him to let the inmate have it. He will understand the security position and handle it appropriately.
- If a prisoner raises a grievance with you about any individual or issue, make no comment other than that you will be happy to pass on the concern to the chaplain or an officer, if desired. If the complaint is against the chaplain, make it clear that you are his guest, and are grateful for the opportunity to come to visit. Any prisoner wishing to pursue the matter must do so through the normal channels – governor, personal officer, board of visitors, etc.
- If asked for Bibles, refer the inmate to the chaplain. Say that if there are any problems with that, he should let you know, and you will seek to help later by contact with the chaplain.
- If asked for any other things by an inmate, other than Christian literature, say you cannot supply those things. Refer the prisoner to the chaplain. (You may be surprised what you get asked for!)

## 6. Prisoners

- Although many prisoners seem very nice, all have been convicted of some crime or other. Some will volunteer details of their crimes (do not ask – wait to be told) but sometimes the crimes reported can be selective and minimal.
- About one fifth of prisoners cannot read or write. Many of the remainder cannot read or write well.
- A significant proportion comes from dysfunctional families.
- A third of prisoners lose contact with their family while in prison.
- Most prisoners will have tested positive for one drug (excluding alcohol) on arrest. Some will have started taking drugs in prison.
- Many prisoners are sexually frustrated, and bored, and have very few choices or responsibilities. It is important to think through the implications of all these issues to avoid making some disastrous assumptions. This may result in someone getting hurt, emotionally, physically, or spiritually. That someone may be the prisoner, yourself, or a third party.
- Our behaviour, conversation and dress should reflect the above considerations.
- We do well to remember the Pharisee/sinner model. We are not talking about judgmentalism but prudence and discernment; 'Wise as serpents, harmless as doves' – realistic love. The very depth of prisoners' needs should draw out our compassion, and impel us to give of our best and not fritter away the precious minutes we have.

## 7. The Chaplain (for pastoral visits)

Just as we need to understand prisoners, so we need to put ourselves in the chaplain's shoes. The following considerations may help:

- Unlike life outside, a prisoner cannot choose his place of worship or minister. The chaplain may have a congregation with churchmanship ranging from Anglo-Catholic to Primitive Methodist, used to a worship style ranging from charismatic to Book of Common Prayer, and with a theology ranging from liberal to fundamentalist. Most chaplains strive to provide something for most tastes by inviting a range of outside speakers and groups over a period of time, but they get few bouquets, and often feel they are compromising their own position.

- Again, unlike his counterpart in the community, he rarely has the luxury of quiet preparation in meditation and prayer in his study or vestry. He will generally be fielding calls from security department or the gatehouse about visitors needing to be collected (or worse, without ID). Prisoners may have pressing requests, in the midst of his dealing with bereavement (or worse, suicide). He might be preparing for a chapel meeting or for one of prison's many committees. He can be forgiven for looking for some words of encouragement from people whom he may have hoped understood his exhaustion.
- He will not be best pleased to be advised concerning the unjust treatment of John ? ('Sorry, I can't remember, he didn't tell me his surname'), particularly when after ten minutes of detective work he confirms you have been talking to Jim, the biggest scoundrel in the prison, and the bane of his life. Moral: Try to understand the chaplain, thank him for allowing you to visit, remember you're his guest, encourage him where you can, pray for him (privately), and keep out from under his feet! If there really is an issue you need to raise with him, contact him later in the week when he's recovered! Your consideration might well give him the energy to handle the matter there and then.
- Try to leave him so that you feel confident to sensitively ask him if you can come again.
- Remember that not every chaplain will share your theological basis, that you are there as his guest. He might like you to return. Remember too that 'he' may be 'she'. A prison chapel is not the best place to debate the role of women in the church!
- Remember to write and thank the chaplain if you have had a pastoral visit. Pray for him or her. Who knows if this could lead to an open door to go and share the gospel publicly in that prison one day?

### Discussion Questions

1. Consider why it is better to have a pastoral visit through the prison chaplaincy than to visit through a VO?
2. If you were an inmate being visited by a Christian, what (legitimately!) would you love to hear?
3. What pitfalls should you seek to avoid in visiting someone in prison? How will you avoid them?
4. How can you ensure that at least part of your visit is concentrated on a spiritual discussion?
5. How would your approach vary if you visited an inmate you had never met? (You might have been asked to see him or her by someone else.)
6. What promises should you make to a prisoner and keep? What should you never promise? What assurances could you give to an inmate that he/she would be welcome at your church after release?