

# MINISTRY WITH FAMILIES

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

Galatians 6:10

Families with a loved one behind bars are dealing with grief, hopelessness, anxiety, fear, stigma, and shame. But most of us know little about the needs of families doing time—because that is what they are doing—TIME. Even though they did not commit the crime and have the ability to move freely in society, they are still deeply impacted by the incarceration of their loved one, and they need support. But so often, the support they are offered only adds to their pain. So, how can we help?

**Read the recommended resources and tools.** Read and have available a copy of the recommended books for the family. Read and share the correctional ministry tools with the family.

**Help navigate the jail and prison system.** Families want information about where their loved one is and how they can communicate with them. The websites of most jail, state departments of corrections, and the Federal Bureau of Prisons, provide inmate searches and information about mail, phone calls (outgoing only), visitation, and money. For a directory of State department of corrections and information for families and friends, go to [CMCAINTERNATIONAL.ORG/DIRECTORIES](http://CMCAINTERNATIONAL.ORG/DIRECTORIES).

**Become an educated helper.** The criminal justice system is complicated and unless you are an attorney or have personal experience, it can seem confusing. Don't lean on the family for your education, but instead seek out information and definitions of terms you will hear (See *The Criminal Justice System and Going to Court*). If this is the family's first exposure to the system, they will also need information and you can help them greatly by providing it. They often feel so overwhelmed by the experience that they don't know where to turn for

**Become a committed companion rather than a curious onlooker.**

Immediately after the arrest is made public, there is a lot of interest and help offered by others. Some who initially offer help may do so from less-than-stellar motives, much like the drivers who slow down to look at disasters on the highway. But over time, most fall away. The healing journey that families are on when a loved one is incarcerated is long, with many ups and downs. Families need committed individuals who will be there for the long haul that their journey to recovery will entail. The journey may be years; and the needs will change throughout each stage of the criminal justice process of the court case, sentencing, imprisonment, and coming home. Even after the loved one returns home, support is still needed. Identify individuals (or a small group) who will commit to this long journey and be willing to help with various needs. Coordinate holistic care and provide resources for the helpers. (See recommended resources.)

**Speak truth that is tempered by tenderness.** Some “helpers” feel the need to “speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” Families impacted by the arrest and incarceration of a member are fragile—they need and want the truth but have emotions that are raw from their experiences. They don’t necessarily need to know how terrible things are or may become—their imaginations and fears are greater than you can conceive. So “speaking the truth in love” requires tenderness, timing (Ecclesiastes 7), and discernment as well as self-control.

**Remember that inquiring minds do not need to know.** Families are often inundated by well-meaning people who ask tons of questions about the crime, the arrest, the trial, etc. Sometimes they may need to process what has happened by verbalizing it; at other times, they may be unable to say much due to the ongoing investigation and criminal justice process. You may be curious but be mindful of the constraints the family may be under and respect their need for some privacy.

**Listen with your heart.** Put yourself in the families' shoes and listen with your heart; try looking through their eyes and imagining what they are feeling and experiencing. Practice empathy rather than sympathy—it's much harder than you think to pull off. Listen more often than you speak. Refrain from advice-giving; the family is likely getting plenty of that from paid professionals as well as unpaid "friends." More than anything, they need a kind, compassionate listening ear that seeks to feel what they are feeling.

**Practice self-awareness.** Criminal actions and incarceration elicits strong emotions for most people. The last thing a family needs is for you, as their helper, to project your unresolved issues onto their situation. Be aware of what you are feeling and work it out with either a trusted friend or a mental health professional. Don't take it into the helping situation with a fragile family. This is an opportunity for you to grow as well.

**Look at the family through the lens of trauma.** Adults and children present in the home during the execution of a search warrant, arrest, or criminal activity may have been traumatized by their experiences. As a trauma survivor, they may experience troubling symptoms of which helpers should be aware. The sound of a siren, sight of a police officer, ring of a doorbell, or other noises, smells, or sights may trigger a traumatic reaction. Trauma is real and impacts the brain in significant ways; they are not being "too sensitive" or failing to "get over it." They may need professional help. Be patient, sensitive, and consider recommending the help of a trusted resource.

**Get comfortable with loss.** Loss comes in all sizes, shapes, and colors and is not confined to loss by death alone. The arrest and incarceration of a family member brings tremendous loss for all concerned: loss of freedom, loss of privacy, loss of relationship, loss of presence, loss in standard of living, loss of trust, loss of an anticipated future, loss of a parent or spouse, and potential loss of income, just to name a few. Loss is the ultimate four-letter word! It can be frightening to enter into the depths of grief with another because we also feel vulnerable—all of us fear loss and do our very best to avoid it. But sometimes it comes knocking at our door or even breaks down our doors of resistance and we are forced to come face-to-face with this enemy. Helping a family impacted by incarceration is an opportunity to wrestle with the realities of loss in a broken world and enter into the pain it creates with another. Don't use the phrase, "It will be alright"; we don't know if that is true. Other phrases, such as: "I know how you feel" even if you have been through something similar; or "It must be God's will," may not be helpful at the time. Enter boldly, sit quietly, acknowledge the grief without needing to quiet or fix it. We are offering the gift of our presence to the one who grieves.

**Maintain confidentiality and respect the family's privacy.** None of us can know or fully appreciate the vulnerability a family feels when the sanctity of their home has been invaded by crime and the criminal justice system. If you are called upon to help, maintain their confidences and respect their privacy with fierce determination. It will be hard, particularly if the case has generated media or community-wide interest; the temptation to gossip is huge and is often done under the guise of a "prayer request." Our integrity as helpers can be compromised if we yield to the temptation to share information, and could result in adding to the family's pain.

**Meet the practical needs.** Families impacted by incarceration face so many challenges as they walk through the process—they need practical assistance. Finances are generally one of the biggest concerns for families but childcare, housing, employment, and access to mental health professionals are also important needs. Sometimes it's as simple as providing transportation to the correctional facility for a visit; maybe it's helping the family network with other needs or finding an advocate to help them as they interact with the criminal justice system. If you are

**Forgiveness and reconciliation cannot be forced.** Forgiveness is a process which takes time, and cannot be demanded. It can be given after feeling the hurt and facing the pain of the harm. Reconciliation may look different for different people and what is needed to mend the harm depends on the one harmed.

**Mentor the incarcerated loved one.** Families may be in too much pain to minister to their incarcerated loved one or they may be burned out from broken promises, irresponsibility, or feeling the effects of their chaotic life. Work with the family on what would be helpful and in scheduling visits. Remember the inmate has limited jail visits so you don't want to take up a visiting slot that the family wants.

**Facilitate communication.** Encourage and provide resources for families to communicate with their incarcerated loved one through mail/email, phone calls, and visits. Needs may include financial, transportation, and childcare.

This list is not exhaustive; it represents the voices of those who have experienced a loved one arrested. Don't be discouraged from helping; a family member expressed it succinctly: "Friends don't need to be perfect or super-human, only to be willing to walk together in brokenness with those who are hurting." With the rising rates of incarceration, many more families will be impacted in the years to come by interaction with the criminal justice system—maybe it's that family next door or the one sitting in the pew in front of you at church. We never know.

## PROVIDING SPIRITUAL CARE

### **Family members may experience spiritual concerns and questions.**

Everyone processes loss and trauma differently and are in different spaces spiritually at the time of the arrest. Spiritual reactions to a loved one being arrested may include:

- ◆ Questions about faith, God, evil and justice
- ◆ Feeling or expressing anger at God, their loved one, or other members of their family
- ◆ Engaging in self-blame
- ◆ Feelings of shame and withdrawal from the faith community
- ◆ Searching for “meaning” in the traumatic event
- ◆ Seeking God through prayer and scripture reading
- ◆ Anger at the faith community for not meeting their needs

### **Listen to how they are processing the situation.**

Ask questions, such as:

- ◆ How are you bringing this to God?
- ◆ What are you feeling toward God?
- ◆ What are you most struggling with at this time?
- ◆ What do you need? (This may be something practical and not spiritual)

Don't say things like:

- ◆ “I know how you feel” (even if you have experience with a similar situation)
- ◆ “Did you see it coming?” (this implies judgment and blame)
- ◆ “It must be God's will” or “All things work together for good.” (minimizes their pain)

## Prayer

- ◆ Ask how you can be praying for them.
- ◆ Ask permission first, “Would you like me to pray for you now?” Pray for what they requested, not what you think they need.
- ◆ After they have received the news and are verbally processing, don’t interrupt them to pray. This may help you feel better because you feel helpless and want to do something, but what they most often need is the ministry of presence. Be there and just listen.

## Sharing Scripture

- ◆ Ask permission, “Can I share a verse with you?”
- ◆ Use Scripture wisely and in the proper context. Be sensitive to what they are feeling. If they are angry at God, sharing Romans 8:28 may not be helpful.

## Recommended Resources

(Available at [CMCAINTERNATIONAL.ORG](http://CMCAINTERNATIONAL.ORG))

### When Your Child Is Arrested

*A Parent's Guide to the Juvenile Justice System*

Scott Larson and John Kinsley

Topics: Help!; My Child Has Been Arrested: Now What?; What Happens on the Inside?; Coming Home; Spiritual Opportunities for You and Your Child

### Arrested

*Making Decisions for Yourself and Your Incarcerated Loved One*

Lennie Spitale

Topics: Receiving the News; Communicating with Your Loved One; Deciding "To Bail or Not to Bail?"; Understanding the Legal Process; Hiring an Attorney; Discovering God's Plan for You

### Sentenced

*Maintaining Relationships During Incarceration*

Lennie Spitale

Topics: Where to Start; Maintaining the Relationship: Long Distance; Maintaining the Relationship: In Person; Working with the Correctional Staff; What to Do about the Children; The Most Important Relationship of All!

### Released

*Preparing for Your Incarcerated Loved One's Return Home*

Lennie Spitale and Karen Swanson

Topics: Preparation for Freedom; Reentry Anxieties: Five Common Fears; Accept Personal Responsibility: "Man Up!"; Relational and Emotional Issues Ahead; Suggestions for Successful Reentry; A Child's Adjustment to a Returning Parent; The Ultimate Solution

### Waiting Together

*Hope and Healing for Families of Prisoners*

Carol Kent

Due to events beyond your control, you find yourself with a loved one in prison. What now? Carol Kent has been there and knows what it's like to have life flipped upside down. She writes **Waiting Together** from a heart that understands what it's like to navigate a new normal, offering hope and healing from a Biblical perspective. This 90-day guide, filled with devotions, prayers, and Scripture, comforts hurting hearts and shows how God can bless families in similar situations. (Available at [DHP.ORG](http://DHP.ORG))