

Letter Writing Guidelines:

A list of recommendations for corresponding with inmates

by Lennie Spitale

The following are suggested guidelines for writing letters to inmates. They are generally agreed upon by most prison ministers to be the safest and kindest approach to this worthwhile venture and are based upon many years of collective experience. Men and women in prison love to receive letters and it can be a meaningful ministry to both those who receive them, as well as to those who send them. However, to help avoid miscommunication between the “outside” writer and the “inside” writer, these guidelines are necessary. Certain cultural dynamics are at play that can affect perceptions, which, in turn, can lead to misunderstandings. Although these guidelines were written for the specific use of Christian volunteers, most of the principles would apply to others as well.

1. It is strongly urged that women should write to women and men should write to men. The only exceptions to this would be:

- The inmate is a relative or a prior close acquaintance.
- The writer is over sixty.

Note: Of all the cautions that will cause the most problems when ignored, it is this one. Of all the reasons given for ignoring it, few have stood the test of time or proven to be prudent.

2. It is best to correspond with someone who has been recommended by the chaplain, a seasoned volunteer, or a credible prison ministry. There are many men and women who would love to receive letters from you. The chaplain is the one who is most familiar with the spiritual condition of the inmates under his or her care. They are best suited to choose someone they know who would be least likely to abuse the privilege, and who would benefit most from your correspondence. Another option is to correspond under the auspices of a credible prison ministry organization that has established a healthy letter-writing procedure. Be aware, however, that not all groups that host pen-pal ministries are discerning about whom they recommend. Ask them to explain their selection procedures.

3. Be sure of your motive.

- What is your primary reason for writing?
- What other reasons could there be? List them.

4. Keep your letters on a spiritual focus. This does not mean that you cannot discuss things of a general nature, or of mutual interests, ambitions, or aspirations. (We need to be genuine in our communication and it is natural and appropriate to speak about such things.) But your primary role in writing is that of spiritual encouragement in the form of Christian friendship. If you keep your letters bathed in spiritual realities, they will be a source of constant encouragement to both of you and will be an aid in keeping their contents on a healthy track.

5. Do not discuss their court case or legal issues with them.

6. Do not discuss their crime with them.

7. Do not inquire as to why they are there.

8. Do not engage in negative discussions concerning the prison administration, its officials, correctional staff, or any other employee.

9. Do not feed into (or otherwise encourage) vindictive, negative, vengeful, or angry discourses of any kind. Always turn such expressions toward Biblical truths and principles.

10. Never discuss another inmate or divulge the names of other inmates to others on the outside. For security reasons, the institution usually prohibits this. Prayer meetings, for example, are a place where this can easily occur. If you want prayer for a particular need, you do not have to reveal the person's name.

11. Do not discuss details of anything pertaining to security issues within the prison. These include such things as: movement times, counts, specific disciplinary procedures, transportation practices, or places where inmates work—especially if it is outside the walls.

12. Never contact other individuals on behalf of the inmate.

13. Do not include an additional note or message for an inmate other than the person to whom your letter is addressed. This also means not enclosing a note from someone else other than yourself.

14. Unless you are a close friend or relative, use a church address or post office box as a return address. This is not because the one you are writing can't be trusted, but simply because addresses have a way of getting into the hands of others. Privacy is not a part of the culture. Avoid divulging any personal information that you wouldn't want other inmates to know. You should always write your letters with the awareness that what you divulge to the one you are writing can easily be read by others.

15. Make no promises that you are not prepared to keep. The desperate state of incarceration cause inmates to cling to the slightest promise you might make, even if it has only been implied or inferred. Be clear about what you can or cannot do, including your future intentions.

16. Remember that most inmates will be released within a few years. Unless you are personally planning to work with them when they are out, make sure that the limits of the assistance you are willing to give is clearly understood. Christian kindness and pen pal support is often assumed to mean that you will be there for them when they get out. This has disillusioned many inmates over the years, and given Christianity a bad name as a result. Make it clear what you can or cannot do. The earlier the better. **Note:** In the event that you are in love with the one you are writing, are you prepared for the *reality* that they will be arriving at

your door when they are released? (As odd as it may seem, many individuals did not truly expect this to happen and panic when the time comes.)

17. If possible, ask the institution for a list of rules for visitors. You will find that many of the rules that apply to visitors will be applicable to letter-writing as well. If you are unable to obtain these rules, you may want to consider calling the institution for any restrictions they may have regarding letter writing. They will tell you what their particular facility permits or disallows. These rules will differ from institution to institution. For example, one place may allow you to enclose postage stamps in your letters, while in many others this is strictly forbidden.

18. If you are an active volunteer, most institutions do not allow you to write inmates at the same facility in which you are serving. This prohibition usually includes personal visits in the visiting room, which is in addition to your normal volunteer activities. You will usually be asked to choose whether you want to be a volunteer or a visitor. The reason for this is because you will wind up having more time with an individual than the prison allows for any of the other inmates' visitors. This can sometimes create bad feelings between the residents and cause conflicts the prison doesn't need. The administration also feels that such extra exposure increases the risk of contraband or manipulation and could lead to a compromise of other security issues. For these same reasons, writing to inmates at the institution in which you volunteer is usually prohibited by institutional rules.

19. Be careful of Christian phrases that can be misinterpreted. This is especially true if rule #1 is being broken. Statements like "I really love you in the Lord," or even signing your letters, "In Christian Love," or "Much Love in Christ," can all be misconstrued by someone not accustomed to hearing such phrases. Similarly, the writing of poetry is a popular pastime in prison, but enclosed in a letter, it has a way of leading into deeper sentiments much more quickly than ordinary communication might generally permit. Emotionally needy people have a way of reading between the lines and hearing what they want to hear. This is true not only of the inmate correspondent, but of the outside one as well.

20. Do not write to inmates that have become well known in the media. If you did not know this person previously, it could be that your sudden interest in contacting him or her has its motives rooted more in the flesh than in the Spirit. You should ask yourself if your desire to write a note of encouragement to other inmates is equal to your concern for this particular person. If it isn't, you probably shouldn't pursue it.

21. Do not permit the inmates' letters to inquire too deeply about your personal feelings. This applies primarily to cross-gender communication. Be wary of the tone of the letter becoming too forward or familiar.

22. Do not permit the letters to probe too deeply into your personal affairs. (Home, business, etc.)

23. Never send someone else's address. For example, responding to the request, "Do you know anyone else out there who might be willing to write me?" Be especially cautious if the request is for someone of the opposite sex to write. Sometimes these requests can come in the form of a need for "more Christian fellowship."

24. Never inform someone else that the prisoner to whom you are writing will soon be moved to another specific location. Not even family members. This is a serious breach of security. There is usually no good reason why the inmate can't inform such people himself.

25. You should not be a recent convert. The majority of inmates are not out to "con" you. Their need for a friend in the form of a letter is a genuine need that—using wisdom—can be appropriately met. But their culture is an emotionally lonely one. The need that letters can fill is a close cousin to the same need that can lead to relationships going further than intended. Keeping letters on a healthy keel, as well as spiritually focused, requires maturity and discernment.

26. You should be in touch with your own emotions as well. This is especially true if rule #1 is being broken. There have been many cases where the outside letter-writers have proven to be more emotionally needy than the inmate to whom they are writing. The desire to write is sometimes masked in a desire "to help," but it is actually the outside writer who is seeking to fill a need. If you are still tempted to break rule #1, never write if you are married—and especially if the marriage is not as strong as it could be. This is an absolute recipe for disaster.

27. Do not get into the habit of sending "canteen money." As the relationship progresses, it is natural to want to help them financially. They may mention along the way that they have no money in their canteen fund. (An inmate account that allows them to buy extra items such as toiletries or candy.) The best way of dealing with this is to establish early on that your role is to provide some spiritual encouragement and friendship— nothing else. Most inmates understand and respect this. But there is a smaller percentage, however, who intentionally use letter writing as their primary means for financial assistance. There is a greater danger of this happening if the following rule (#28) is not heeded.

28. Do not write to inmates as the result of answering an ad, or through some other impersonal approach. This includes having a friend who is currently corresponding with someone in prison who has asked you to write to the "friend of her friend." (It is highly likely that your friend is already breaking rule #1, and the inmate with whom they are corresponding has a buddy who also wants to write someone in violation of rule #1.) Also be aware that some inmates are capable of forcing the one you are writing to make this request, by threat or otherwise. Simply say no.

29. Set your parameters early. Let your correspondent know why you are primarily writing, and stick to it. If the relationship grows naturally and you feel it's appropriate to enlarge those boundaries, you may do so as time and propriety permit. But if the prisoner cannot abide by those limits, then it would be best to quit writing.

30. Terminate unhealthy communications. If you are already in a situation that is not healthy, tell the person why you feel it has become inappropriate or uncomfortable, and that you will no longer be corresponding. (In some cases, it is possible that writing less is a more appropriate response. In other cases, stopping immediately will be the best course of action. It depends on the nature of the problem and the temperament of the inmate.) In the rare event that an inmate will not desist when asked, either through threats or some form of emotional manipulation, a call to the security division of the prison will usually put an end to it.

Note: It might be surprising to learn that in some cases, it has been the inmate who has been poorly treated by those writing to them. Some of these offenses can be:

- Insensitivity to them as people. The outside writer has his or her own agenda. (If the inmate doesn't "respond right," the relationship is broken off.) In a real sense, they have been led on.
- Personal insecurities or fears of the letter writer. Some are so fearful of "being conned" that they detect a conspiracy to rip them off between every line. Such people should not engage in letter-writing in the first place, just to prove some self-aggrandizing point to themselves.
- Hidden motives. Oftentimes, the outside writers are not aware of their own improper motivations. These can include such things as their own emotional neediness, or a desire to be in a "safe relationship." (No physical entanglement.) They may have a Messiah complex, a mother (or father) complex, or be on an ego trip because they can say they are "writing to someone in prison." Men writing to female prisoners can imagine themselves more desirable because they believe they are "the only game in town." Men, especially, are susceptible to the "white-knight syndrome," ready to assist the poor, helpless maiden. Initially seeing themselves as a mentor or helper, they can slowly make room for self-delusion and fantasy, making way for inappropriate emotional attachments. All of these, and many other reasons, are unfair and unkind to the inmate. Since the reasons for writing are basically self-centered, the inmate often winds up being dumped or "written off" when, all along, the root problem is found in a selfish (and often undetected) need in the heart of the outside letter writer. The ultimate result is further rejection for the soul in prison.

31. Seek advice. If you are still in doubt as to how to proceed, seek the advice of your pastor or someone you may know who has been involved in prison ministry for more than a few years. There are credible avenues and options for writing letters to inmates. Ask your local prison ministry what these options might be, or to whom they might refer you.

Final thoughts. By this time, you may actually be feeling a little discouraged. The mere reading through this list of guidelines (though necessary) can have the cumulative effect of deflating one's enthusiasm for the entire venture. But its purpose was not to discourage you; it was written to help you operate with a greater degree of freedom. Exchanging letters with someone in prison can be a very edifying experience for both individuals and is, without doubt, an encouraging and vital ministry to lonely souls. Many correspondents have become good friends

through the exchange of these letters, and it is possible to maintain a healthy atmosphere for an edifying relationship.

But you should not go into it blindly or naively. The need, by itself, doesn't eliminate the cultural realities that surround it. We did not create these cultural dynamics; they just are. So these cautions were listed that you might be better equipped to deal with these issues when, or if, the need should arise. If you will undertake to prayerfully and thoughtfully study each one, and appropriate them, you will be more confident in your ability to keep the letters on a healthy keel.

Having said all that, it is our belief that many inmates can be greatly encouraged and built up in their most holy faith through a joyful and spiritual exchange of letters. The dear souls in prison will frequently bless you as much—if not more—than you ever expected to bless them. Their letters are often deeply touching and spiritual. There are many strong brothers and sisters in prison. The rules are simply in place to minimize the dangers and maximize the blessings that such an undertaking can bring. May God bless you as you seek to alleviate their pain by remembering them in this merciful way.

Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering. Hebrews 13:3

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