

WORKSHEET: SESSION ONE



Everything changes at the prison gates

Approximately 80,000 leave prison every year. 15% of the prison population attends chaplaincy activities = 12,000 per year. About 1000 people who have been practicing their faith leave prison each month. Only about 20% go on to join a faith community.

List some of the reasons why prisoners might struggle to join a faith community beyond prison:

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

Film - Leaving Prison In Faith: Hopes

Watch the film as a group. The first film lasts for just over ten minutes and is available at www.welcomedirectory.org.uk/sessions

What did you notice that stood out or surprised you?

Why does it matter?

What does it mean for me?

Talk together about the impact that the first film made upon you.

ROLLERCOASTER

Over time most people give up crime but leaving this life can be like a rollercoaster. It is important for those who support people leaving prison to acknowledge that all recovery has its ups and downs and they should therefore be prepared to be disappointed from time to time. Resettlement is messy. Life is messy. Isn't it for everybody?

INCLUSION

Stopping criminal activity is supported strongly by having access to what is considered to be a normal life by being included in the wider community. Three key dimensions of being involved in a community are the capacity to purchase goods and services, involvement in economic and socially valuable activities and social inclusion with family friends and the wider community. Inclusion helps to curb feelings of shame, isolation and a reluctance to get involved.

ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance emerged as the most commonly cited theme in choosing a faith community. Participants experienced repeated rejection and isolation in the transition out of prison. Probation was a stigmatising experience, looking for jobs was often disheartening and re-connecting with family and friends could be fraught with old hurts and rejections. After repeated humiliations one person was relieved when he went to church and found "they treat me just like a normal person." He remained in the same church throughout the study. Being 'welcomed with open arms' offered participants respite from the difficult realities of transition. It was important that this welcome was felt to be "authentic", "familial", extended by "people who really care" and not dependent on non-deviance.

EXAMPLE

Participants said that volunteers helped them to change through providing opportunity, inspiration and example: opportunity to respond to the gift of caring relationships. Inspiration through seeing that others can do it and believe they can too, and example through modelling how to deal with difficulties and struggles in a positive community. Communities who are proactive and responsive in showing ways of both being and becoming 'good' are shown to help people leave crime behind.

SOLIDARITY

Through working with prisoners, volunteers came to understand that prisoners were not so 'other'. It is through solidarity that we have the hope of empathy - to feel the pain of the other and so to be moved to compassion. Compassion is one of the central acts of individual and communal faith - the practical outworking of virtue. Solidarity also leads us to understand our own potential to fail. It was Simone Weil in Waiting for God who says "I have the germ of all possible crimes, or nearly all, within me." 1951:⁷

DIFFICULT

Most criminals want to stop committing crime but leaving a life of crime is a difficult, slow, faltering, precarious struggle, involving episodes of relapse and recovery. Giving up crime is unlikely when the difficulties faced upon release are too great to overcome.

DISEMPOWERING

For people leaving prison life is limited in many ways: they are expected to take responsibility for their past actions and future responses, for themselves and for others, yet their power to choose is limited, freedoms are curbed and restrictions are placed upon important aspects of their lives. This is a confusing message. Limiting someone excludes them from the mainstream; they are different, to be watched and kept at arms length. However, by being empowered to make decisions for themselves - something prison does not allow - people leaving prison can grow in confidence and personal responsibility.

BEFRIENDING

Knowing another person and being known by them in return has been shown to be a powerful factor in helping people change for the better. It is this openness to the other that nourishes human life and makes neighbourliness possible. However, being kept at a distance alienates and can lead to social exclusion.

TRUST

Many people believe that trust has to be earned, particularly people leaving prison. However, research shows that it is important to move beyond the question of whether a person is trustworthy to recognising that they are a person. By treating them as worthy because of their personhood we extend trust. This powerful and subversive act is a profoundly humanising one.

The findings of this research suggests that perhaps being trusted is an inherent part of being, or becoming, trustworthy. As such, bestowing trust relies less on perfection and more on connection. However, when a person leaving prison is treated as a risk to be managed it can actually lead to an increase in reoffending as it tends to segregate and therefore dehumanise the person involved.

BELONGING

Faith communities are social communities that offer people a sense of belonging. This is one of the main benefits gained by joining a faith community. Worshipping with like minded people who shared their beliefs and accepted them despite their past as well as being a place where people speak to you boosted self confidence. The most important thing faith communities provide is connection with other humans beings, practical help is secondary. Being involved in a faith community also provides a routine that is an important part of leaving old patterns of behaviour behind. Involvement in a faith community is made easier if they had established contact before release.

PRISONER FACTSHEET

The following statistics are taken from The Bromley Briefings 2014/15; 2017: Prison Reform Trust.



15% prisoners were homeless before entering custody.
44% of prisoners reported living in their accommodation prior to custody for less than a year and 28% had lived there for less than six months.



59% regularly played truant from school.
32% of women and 43% of men were expelled or permanently excluded from school.
57% have literacy skills expected of an 11 year old.
20-30% have learning disabilities or difficulties that interfere with their ability to cope with the criminal justice system.
47% have no qualifications.



13% have never had a job.
81% of women and 67% of men were unemployed in the four weeks before custody.



49% of women and 23% of men identified as suffering from both anxiety and depression.
25% of women and 15% of men have symptoms indicative of psychosis.
46% of women and 21% of men have attempted suicide at some point.
36% of people in prison are estimated to have a physical or mental disability.



64% have used Class A drugs.
22% drank alcohol every day in the four weeks before custody.
66% of women and 38% of men in prison report committing offences in order to get money to buy drugs.
70% of prisoners had been drinking when they committed the offence for which they were in prison.
Nearly half of women in prison report having committed offences to support someone else's drug use.



48% of people in prison have a history of debt.
40% of prisoners and 64% of former prisoners felt that their debts had worsened during their sentence.
64% of prisoners said that they had claimed benefits during the 12 months before they went into prison.



31% of women and 24% of men were taken into care as a child.
53% of women and 27% of men experienced abuse as a child.
50% of women and 40% of men observed violence in the home as a child.
54% of prisoners have children under the age of 18.
26% of the prison population 22,683 people, are from a minority ethnic group.

What does your faith or beliefs have to say?

Each of us has a way of describing our faith and 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 and beliefs in relation to the realities of life in prison and the challenges of resettlement afterwards.

Have a conversation about your faith and beliefs and its response to those who are imprisoned, particularly those who have finished or are about to finish their time in prison. Spend 10-15 minutes exploring these questions 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?

Spend five minutes studying the ten words.

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?

Read the preparation sheet for session two and watch the second film called Connections.