



The Welcome Directory

A Guide to

Welcoming Prison- Leavers into Your Faith-Community



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The need

It is estimated that each year around 8,000 people who practice their faith on the 'inside' are released from prison but do not join a faith-community on the 'outside'. There are many reasons for this, but one is that faith communities feel nervous about encouraging prison-leavers to join them and feel ill-equipped to provide appropriate support to them. This is partly due to the 'myth' that all prison-leavers need high levels of complex support from the faith-communities that they attend, and therefore supporting the faith-development of prison-leavers in this way is best left to 'specialist' congregations. Whilst there is much benefit from a faith-community being able to provide lots of specialist services to prison-leavers, it is also true that every Faith-community has the capacity to provide faith support to those who have been in prison. Whilst your faith-community might not be able to provide *everything* that a prison-leaver needs in life, it is most certainly able to welcome prison-leavers into a community that will encourage and support them to grow in the their faith and access other support as needed. This short guide provides some simple step-by-step instructions on how you can do this, so that some of the 8,000 prison-leavers who don't feel accepted in a faith-community can find a great welcome at your faith-community.

NOTE: This guide is designed to complement, not replace, any existing local-faith-community or denominational / network guidance or policies, which you should continue to follow.



Preparing to welcome people who have been in prison

Scenario: You recognise that people who have been in prison may want to attend your faith-community, and you're keen to make sure you can safely welcome them.

What to do:

1. Recognise that the majority of prison-leavers have committed crimes which do not greatly increase their risk in a faith-community setting: such as shop lifting, failing to pay a fine, low-level theft, driving offences, etc. However, there are some who have committed more serious offences, where extra support and consideration is needed.
2. Know what your safeguarding policy says, and have the contact details of your safeguarding lead! You don't want to be caught off-guard when a prison-leaver turns up to your time of worship, prayer or meditation.
3. Develop a contact list of local and national organisations that you can get in touch with, if needed, to help you support people who have been in prison. As a starting point visit the websites of your local council, health and probation services, or visit www.signpost.services.
Particularly include:

- a. Local probation.
- b. Council housing department.
- c. Debt / money advice.
- d. Drug and alcohol support.
- e. Mental health crisis team.
- f. Job centre or local projects which support the employment of prison-leavers.
- g. Safeguarding advice.



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4. Teach people in your faith-community to expect people with different needs and life-stories to seek friendship and support from them, and behave accordingly. For example, by being non-judgmental, being friendly but not intrusive in conversations, avoid leaving personal belongings lying around, not giving money, parents being aware of who their children are talking to, etc.
 5. Encourage some members of your faith-community to become aware of the specific barriers that people who have been in prison face when integrating into a faith community and rebuilding life in wider-society. This can be done through attending The Welcome Directory Prison Awareness Course.
 6. Build your own support-network of faith-leaders who can encourage you, particularly if problems arise; which may include your denominational or network support structures.

A prison-leaver asks if they can attend your faith-community

Scenario: You've taken a phone call or had a visit from a prison-leaver who is asking if it's OK to come to one of your times of worship, prayer or meditation.

What to do:

1. Appreciate their interest in attending your faith-community – it's always a good thing for someone to ask if they can come!
2. Ask them if they are under any restrictions from probation / MAPPA (Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements). If yes, explain that you would love them to attend, but need to make sure things are in place to support them and therefore they should wait to hear



something before attending. This will give you time to call probation services (see below) and arrange any specific support required.

3. If they say they are not under MAPPA restrictions, arrange to meet the prison-leaver to talk about anything that might make it difficult for them to attend and any specific support they are wanting from you. Listen out for procedural issues, such as them being supervised by probation services, as well as any apprehensions about how they will be treated by the congregation. Also consider their expectations of your Faith Community, and manage these appropriately – don't give the impression you can practically help in ways you might not!
4. Explain that you will be available to talk with them when they attend. Alternatively, ask for permission to tell ONE trusted and experienced member of your faith-community about the prison-leaver so they can be on-hand to talk with them when they attend for the first time.
5. If the prison-leaver says they are under MAPPA restrictions or if anything causes you concern during your initial conversations, call probation services to explain that the prison-leaver has asked to attend your faith-community and whether there is anything they need to let you know in relation to this. If there are concerns, follow the advice from probation and your safeguarding policy. (Note: Probation Services are usually very helpful to faith-communities, and are very willing to advise where necessary – do not be afraid of getting in touch with them!)
6. In confidence, for your own accountability you may wish to inform other leaders in the faith-community or denomination and / or the safeguarding lead so they are aware. But this should be minimal, on a need-to-know basis only. Remember that the prison-leaver's life story is their own to share with those they want to, not your story to share!



A prison-leaver attends at your faith community, without prior contact

Scenario: You've just found out that someone who has recently been released from prison has attended your faith community.

What to do:

1. Welcome them and appreciate their presence - it's a positive statement about your faith-community that they have chosen to attend.
2. Recognise that attending faith-community might be difficult for them and aim to put them at ease.
3. Get to know them, and their needs. Everyone who has been in prison is different, just as everyone else who joins your faith-community is different. They will have different needs –spiritually, emotionally and in other ways. Aim to understand where they are on their religious journey and what faith-based, relational or practical support they might need.
4. Clearly explain how your faith-community can help them grow in their faith. For example, services and groups / activities they can attend.
5. Sensitively enquire about whether they are under probation / MAPPA restrictions. If so, or if anything else causes you concern, call probation services to explain that the prison-leaver has attended your faith-community and whether there is anything they need to let you know before they return. Follow any advice given by probation and your safeguarding policy.



Probation services refer a prison-leaver to your faith-community

Scenario: You have received communication from probation services, stating that a prison-leaver would like to attend your faith-community.

What to do:

1. Arrange an appointment with the probation worker, where time can be given to discuss the situation carefully.
2. Inform your local safeguarding officer and, if necessary, the regional or national safeguarding officers of any religious organisation / network you are part of. They should be involved in the discussions with probation services.
3. Listen to any requirements the probation worker insists on in order for the prison-leaver to attend. For example, the prison-leaver may need to be accompanied at all times by an appropriate member of the congregation.
4. Ask about the needs of the prison-leaver, including the religious, social, emotional support the probation worker would like you to provide.
5. Inform the probation worker about your faith-community, especially the type and number of vulnerable people who attend, and any other prison-leavers currently in your faith-community.
6. Carefully consider whether you feel able to adequately meet the requirements and the needs of the prison-leaver. Try to accept the prison-leaver, if at all possible. However, it is better to decline if you feel your faith community will struggle to meet the requirements and the needs highlighted by probation services.



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7. Arrange to meet with the prison-leaver, if possible with the probation worker. Tell them that you very much want them to be part of your faith community. Inform them of any requirements they will need to keep to when they attend, and how you can support them. It is usually good to put this in writing, and your safeguarding policy may have guidance on this. If in doubt, ask probation for support.

Working with a prison-leaver (pastoral)

Scenario: A prison-leaver has decided to regularly attend your faith-community, as they appreciate the great welcome they have received and believe you can help them grow in their faith and rebuild their lives in society.

1. Offer to provide some one-to-one pastoral conversations, either with yourself and the prison-leaver or another trusted member of the faith-community; with the aim of helping them become integrated into various aspects of the life of the faith-community.
2. During those sessions ask the prison leaver to tell you their story. Pick up on the spiritual / faith, emotional and practical needs of the prisoner as well as their dreams and hope in these areas.
3. Encourage the prison-leaver to seek out support for their emotional and practical needs from local support organisations (you will have a list of these – see section 1.) If appropriate, offer to help them make the appointment and support them in attending.
4. Encourage the prison-leaver to seek out support for their spiritual / faith development within the usual channels of the faith-community (e.g. groups and activities, one-to-one mentoring, prayer, worship or meditation sessions). The aim of this is to help them develop spiritually



as *part* of the community and not provide a unique support system which they come to rely on. In this, encourage the prison-leaver to share some of their story with others who will help them in their faith journey.

5. Have occasional follow-up pastoral conversations with both the prison-leaver and other people in the faith-community who are supporting their faith development to check on progress and address any issues.

Note: Much of this may generally happen with any new member of the faith-community. However, for prison-leavers this process may be more intense and go on for longer.

The effects of a prison sentence

Prison sentences affect individuals in many ways. The only way to understand how it has affected an individual is to listen to them. However, it is important to be aware of the following, particularly in regard to how a prison sentence might affect a prison-leaver's integration into a faith-community.

1. Faith services and activities are often very different in prison to those in the community. The prison-leaver might benefit from someone explaining what is happening during faith services, particularly if someone has come to faith in prison and that is their only experience of faith-community.
2. A prisoner's life is regulated by the prison 'regime'. In this, they are called for and taken to faith-community at the right time. It may take time, once they are released, to regain a sense of personal responsibility for making their own way to worship services, prayers or meditations.
3. Prison sentences carry a stigma. Prison-leavers may be very nervous about how they will be 'seen' if others know that they have been in prison. It might, therefore, take time to build up trust for them to be confident about sharing their experience of prison.



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4. In prison, prisoners have access to support 24/7 and can call on Chaplaincy any time during the working day. They, therefore, need help in adjusting to the fact that support from the faith-community is often not instantly accessible, but will be provided as soon as possible.

The extra work in supporting prison-leavers

Any person who attends your faith-community will have their own needs, and faith-communities would usually work with them to find the most appropriate ways of supporting them over time. In this way, supporting the faith-development of prison-leavers is no different to working with anyone else. Therefore, in practice there is little more a faith-community needs to DO than they would do if aiming to help anyone else in the community. However, there are a few simple additions, which are important:

- Becoming aware of how prison sentences affect individuals in their spiritual, emotional and relational lives.
- Being ready to welcome prison-leavers: having developed a non-judgmental faith-community culture, knowing who to contact for additional support and ensuring your safeguarding policy is up to date and understood.
- Providing intentional pastoral support, which may be more intense than for other new-comers to the faith-community, and supporting them in accessing help from other organisations.
- If there are concerns or if a prison leaver is under MAPPA restrictions, making probation services aware that a prison-leaver is attending and following any advice given.



The next steps

If you're wanting to be part of a faith-community that is welcoming to people who have been in prison, why not.....

1. Start to prepare for prison-leavers to join your faith-community (see section 1). In particular, encourage one or two members of your congregation to sign up for the next Prison Awareness Course from The Welcome Directory. This will give you an insight into the experiences of prison leavers and consider how your faith-community can welcome them on release. (Register your interest in the next course by emailing admin@welcomedirectory.org.uk.)
2. Register your faith-community with The Welcome Directory using the online form at www.welcomedirectory.org.uk/Register-Now. This will give prison chaplains, probation workers, other professionals the confidence to inform prison-leavers that your faith-community will give them a great welcome, should they wish to attend. Registering is free, but requires that 1) the senior leader of the faith-community approves of the registration, 2) an active safeguarding policy with named lead is in place (for safeguarding guidance please see www.welcomedirectory.org.uk/safeguarding-guidance), 3) a 'champion' is nominated with whom we can communicate and promote this work in the faith-community, and 4) the faith-community has some awareness of the needs of prison-leavers. For more information see our FAQ's at www.welcomedirectory.org.uk/FAQs

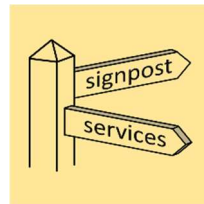


The Welcome Directory: Who Are We?

The Welcome Directory is a multi-faith organisation. We maintain a directory of registered faith communities who have declared their commitment to welcoming prison leavers and providing them with appropriate support beyond the gates. This directory is used by prison chaplains, probation workers and prison leavers themselves, to identify welcoming communities upon release from prison.

Our website includes a searchable map, displaying all registered faith communities. This enables individuals leaving prison, chaplaincy and resettlement teams to easily identify welcoming faith communities beyond the gates. To explore the map visit: www.welcomedirectory.org.uk.

Other Sources of Information





The Welcome Directory

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