

# PARTNERS IN PRAYER

10 issues for jails and religious ministries to consider to ensure success

By Brandon “Choe” Sergent, Thomas Grugel, and Daniel Phillips, Ph.D.

Ministries are important to jail life, since inmates and their family members are often in crisis during and after incarceration, and often require spiritual and practical help. But jail staff and religious groups need to discuss 10 issues before launching a jail ministry—defined here as any assistance given and/or activities conducted by people from a religious organization (e.g., temple, mosque, church).

A 2016 *Christianity Today* article, “Why Most Pastors Don’t Do Prison Ministry,” reported that nearly all pastors and other church leaders surveyed believe that churches should be involved with inmates and their families. Pastors, however, admit that they don’t often have the training and finances to develop a jail ministry. Successful jail ministries must consider the needs of every group involved: jail staff, the larger religious organization, ministry team individuals, and incarcerated people and their families.

Below are the 10 specific questions jail staff should discuss with any religious group before beginning a jail ministry:

- 1. Does the ministry have buy-in from the members of the religious organization?** Successful jail ministries need the support of the religious organization’s members. Clergy and jail ministry team members understand the importance of helping those incarcerated, but if members of the religious organization don’t support the jail ministry, it is likely to fail. Buy-in also includes commitment. Many incarcerated individuals are accustomed to being let down. Religious organization members need to understand the commitment of time and resources it takes for a jail ministry to be successful.
- 2. Will the ministry just involve one person or will there be a team of people?** Too often, the ministry is performed by one person. If that person is no longer able to go to the jail, the ministry ends. The best kind of ministry is one that can operate successfully with individual team members coming and going. A religious



organization must develop new leaders and team members who can fill the gaps when help is needed to operate its ministry continuously.

- 3. Does the religious organization have money budgeted specifically for the ministry?** A ministry’s success depends on having a budget to purchase items for those in jail. A modest jail ministry budget can require \$200–\$300 per month. If the religious organization doesn’t outline a specific budget, the ministry may have limited success or fail. For religious organizations, monetary contributions to such a budget can be an opportunity for those who can’t be involved with the jail ministry directly to support it.
- 4. Has the religious organization properly vetted ministry volunteers?** Some people can handle working in a jail environment, and others can’t. Before developing a team to go into the jail, each member needs to be vetted. Ministry members need to understand the jail environment, the jail’s rules, and know what to expect when they visit the jail.
- 5. Are ministry members aware that they will have to undergo training on jail rules and the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA)?** Ministry members will likely focus on what they want to provide to those in jail. But it is very important to provide training to those who want to provide jail ministries, and training may be mandated under PREA. Regardless, members of a successful ministry need to know what’s expected of them, and what’s required for jail safety. Training and vetting can be co-created by jail staff and the religious organization. While this requires some collaboration, it will ensure that everyone operates under the same understanding, and help weed out those who are not fully committed to the ministry.
- 6. What specific activities does the religious group plan to provide in the jail?** Ministries can focus on a variety of activities: religious services; meeting with detainees one-on-one; providing items such as personal care products, religious literature, and toys for visiting kids; and operating groups for substance abusers. In some cases, ministries can be involved in pre-release planning, because the time just after release is so critical. Will the ministry be present when the incarcerated person leaves jail? Will the ministry help a person find a job, housing, or transportation upon release? Will the religious organization welcome released detainees? A jail ministry may not be able to take on all of these duties at the outset, and that’s OK. The important thing is that its members understand what services they plan to provide, and remain focused on those objectives.

7. **Is there a specific strategy and/or curriculum the ministry will use?** Religious organizations should consider using a curriculum that has specific literature such as 12-step group materials, and using a curriculum that will help the incarcerated person transition to the community upon release. Using the same materials in jail and after release will ensure continuity. For example, a detainee may only work through six of the 12 steps while incarcerated, and then be able to pick up with the seventh step in an outside community group.
8. **What specific help, if any, does the religious group plan to provide to detainees' family members?** While a jail ministry is focused on the incarcerated, family members living in the community also have needs. Ask ministry members if they have plans to provide support such as transportation to the jail. In some

cases, prison ministries provide a special "kid-friendly" room for children to visit incarcerated parents.

9. **Do ministry members understand how important it is to communicate and coordinate with jail staff and with the jail chaplain?** Ministry members need to respect and be willing to work with jail's staff and its chaplain, if one is available. Ministry members may not understand the needs of the jail or what the chaplain provides, and should find this out if they expect to be asked to return.
10. **Do ministry members understand that they will have to coordinate their activities with those from other religious groups?** There may be multiple religious groups ministering to people in jail. Those on one organization's ministry team need to be willing to work with others. The goal should be to provide the most good to

detainees; no squabbling between religious organizations should be tolerated.

Discussing these 10 items prior to the launch of a ministry will help ensure its success. Establish buy-in from the members of the religious organization, get a team of properly vetted ministry members, set a budget, and undergo jail training. A religious organization needs to articulate the activities to be performed and a specific curriculum. Finally, ministry members need to communicate and coordinate with jail staff and ministries from other organizations. ✨

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