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MINISTERING TO Those Who Are Incarcerated

By **Marissa Widdison**

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Right now, more than 10 million people are being held in jails or prisons worldwide.¹ Jesus Christ, who loves each person and understands every difficulty, asks us to minister to all of Heavenly Father's children—including those who are incarcerated. "Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee . . . in prison, and came unto thee?"

"And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:37–40).

How can we do what the Savior asks and safely minister to those who are incarcerated? This article provides basic principles as a starting point. Prayerfully discuss with local Church leaders what is appropriate and wise for your area.

Fellow Children of God

While justice systems differ, the challenge of incarceration is shared across nations and

cultures. Doug Richens manages outreach for incarcerated members of the Church. He also coordinates with other faith and community groups to help those impacted by incarceration, regardless of their background or religious views.

"A common stereotype of those who are incarcerated is that they are all untrustworthy, violent, and dangerous," Brother Richens said. "However, I've found that most are not like that. Most feel remorse for their actions. They are trying to rise above the bad choices of the past and live good lives."

In some countries, as many as half of all citizens have an immediate family member who has been incarcerated.² These incarcerated siblings, parents, and children are—apart from being defined by any earthly relationship—fellow children of God.

Mortal and Eternal Judgment

Although life requires us to make judgments, Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ are the only ones who can perfectly judge someone based on their situation, actions, and desires (see 1 Samuel 16:7). That perfect judgment will surely take into consideration circumstances people are born into that make incarceration more likely, such as family trauma, generational poverty, a culture of drug use, etc. Many other factors can influence a person's ability to make good choices, including their health and well-being.³ While it's important for society to enforce laws that keep communities safe, we can do so with compassion and an

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eternal perspective, realizing there is much we don't understand.

"Think about how you would feel if you were judged for the rest of your life based on the worst thing you had ever done," said Tanja Schaffer, a member of the Church who worked at a legal office before founding a prisoner-advocacy group. "It is up to God to forgive whom He will forgive, but He commands us to forgive everyone" (see Matthew 18:21–22).

The principle of God's perfect judgment can also be a source of comfort for victims of crime. Sometimes people who hurt others never face punishment on earth. Victims may suffer long after the prison terms of perpetrators have ended. Many people impacted by incarceration have been both a victim and a perpetrator at different times, reminding us that life is a complicated web of relationships and decisions that affect others. We can find comfort in trusting that Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ understand it all. Their judgment will be perfect. The healing They offer—for both the innocent and repentant—will be complete (see Revelation 21:4).

The Loving Example of Leaders

Elder Gerrit W. Gong of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles described a meeting where everyone around him was dressed in white. There was singing and praying, and God's love was abundant.⁴ Contrary to what many of us might be picturing, this wasn't a temple meeting. This was a ministering visit at a prison where white jumpsuits were the standard uniform.

"The leaders of the Church care about all who have been impacted by crime and

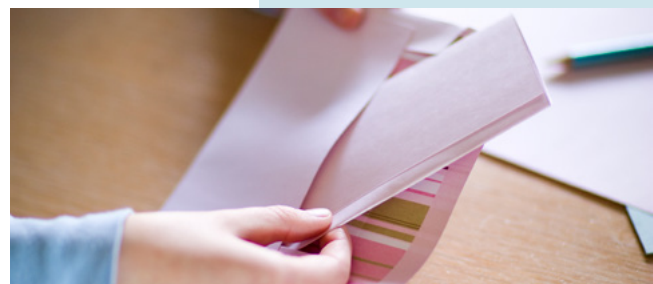
incarceration," Brother Richens testified, describing how one leader gives his own copy of a Church magazine to someone he visits in prison each month. "They frequently visit the incarcerated, support their families, and tenderly care for victims."

Correctional ministries are the responsibility of the stake president, working with ward leaders to address the needs of those in their area. What are stake leaders doing to minister to and share uplifting messages with incarcerated members? In some places, Church members may be called to visit and teach incarcerated people. Brother Richens said that often those members called to provide support are nervous at first, but then they find the calling so meaningful that they never want to be released.

"It's pure religion," he said (see James 1:27).

While we shouldn't feel pressured to visit incarcerated people we don't know, there are other ways we can safely minister. Here are a few:

- Include incarcerated people in your prayers, especially any you know by name. Prayer is powerful!
- Check with local prisons or jails to see if they need donated items. Reading, crafts like crocheting, art projects, and family history research are allowed in many facilities.
- If you know someone who is incarcerated, consider writing them uplifting letters. Make safe, wise choices while communicating. Follow the Spirit and maintain appropriate boundaries.
- Treat the family members of those who are incarcerated—especially children—with love, respect, and inclusion. Remember that family members are generally innocent victims too. The Holy Ghost can help us know how best to minister to all members of the family.



The Holy Ghost Is Not Limited

Incarceration can be an incredibly difficult time in a person's life. But the Holy Ghost isn't limited by walls, bars, or chains. Prayer, scripture study, and humility can invite His comforting presence just as quickly within a jail cell as outside of one. Because of this, prison can become a place of miracles.

Portia Louder, a member of the Church who wrote blog posts while incarcerated, described it as a difficult journey of faith and self-discovery. "I've been through some pretty serious struggles in my life, but I can feel myself being healed through a love that is indescribable," she wrote from prison. "Whatever challenge you are facing right now, wherever you're at on your own journey, please don't give up!"

Garff Cannon, who served as branch president in a jail, described how the Spirit prompted him to speak kindly to a hard-hearted incarcerated man who had led a difficult life. "What you just said to me were the kindest words ever spoken to me in my life," this man said. "I don't recall ever being spoken to with kindness and caring. Thank

you." They ended their visit with the first prayer this man had heard in years.

"Yes, the Holy Ghost is definitely in the correctional facilities," Brother Cannon testified. "God's children are there, and He wants them back."

God makes powerful promises to *all* who choose to follow Him, whether we first learn about Him in Sunday School or in a prison. As Ezekiel 36:26 says, "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you."

Reentering Society Is Extremely Challenging

The worth of a person's soul is not diminished by crime (see Doctrine and Covenants 18:10). When someone desires to change for the better, do we allow them to grow and be forgiven?

"God's grace and compassion are tremendous," Brother Richens said. "Sometimes incarcerated individuals feel forgiven by the Lord long before they are forgiven by the government, society, or even some members of the Church."

Returning to society after incarceration is difficult. Those who have been incarcerated often have trouble getting jobs or housing. We can help them find security in wholesome places and pursue healthy hobbies. Perhaps the most important thing we can do is to be a positive, strengthening friend. When Joseph Smith spoke about prison reform while running for president of the United States, he taught that "rigor and seclusion will never do as much to reform the propensities of men as reason and friendship."⁵

Compassion Makes a Difference

Jude encouraged the Saints to "have compassion" (Jude 1:22). His words echo the Savior's plea to remember those who are in prison. How will we respond to these invitations? Let's make an effort to nourish those who experience incarceration—and their families—with the goodness of God. Our compassion can make a difference. ■

For additional resources on this topic, visit prison.ChurchofJesusChrist.org.

Read another experience from Garff Cannon in this issue on the Gospel Library app or at liahona.ChurchofJesusChrist.org.

NOTES

1. See "World Prison Population List: Eleventh Edition," National Institute of Corrections, [nicic.gov](https://www.nicic.gov).
2. See "Half of Americans Have Family Members Who Have Been Incarcerated," Dec. 11, 2018, Equal Justice Initiative, [eji.org/news](https://www.eji.org/news).
3. See "Traumatic Brain Injury in Criminal Justice," University of Denver, [du.edu/tbi](https://www.du.edu/tbi).
4. Priesthood and Family Department Christmas devotional, December 2019.
5. "Joseph Smith as a Statesman," *Improvement Era*, May 1920, 649.

