



Ministry with Ex-Offenders Re-entering Our Communities

What is reentry, who is reentering, and what are the issues?

Prisoner reentry is the return of a person from prison to life in society. A total of 11,507 persons were released from Virginia's prisons in 2012. They were predominantly male (89%), African American (54%), and young adults (61%) who had been in prisons an average of 36 months; 63 percent had been in prison for nonviolent offenses such as theft and fraud or drug possession/sales. The majority (52%) had not graduated from high school. Approximately one out of five suffered one or more chronic or communicable diseases and, among all prisoners, 13 percent were sent to prison due to mental health problems. The vast majority (82%) were released to a period of supervised probation. The latest available data indicate that within 36 months after release, 54 percent of all releasees have been rearrested, 42 percent have been reconvicted, and 23 percent have been reincarcerated – at a current average cost to taxpayers of \$27,112 per inmate.

- To succeed at reentry, former prisoners need basic necessities – housing, food, clothing, and reliable transportation. Most of all, they need a job. Studies have found that having employment reduced recidivism by 75 percent. But having a felony conviction makes it difficult to get a job, and leaves them ineligible for low-cost housing and food stamps. They also need access to education, job skills training, physical and mental health care and often also help in dealing with substance abuse problems. During this transition many need financial aid.
- Former prisoners also need the help of a positive support system. They may have suffered disruption of family ties, or been members of gangs, and need help with forming a family, and finding peer support and a faith community.
- To help them make their way in a world that changed while they were in prison, and which they often find overwhelming, former prisoners also need a mentor who will walk with them as a friend, offering support and encouragement. Former NBA player Jayson Williams says, “when I got out it was more difficult than being in prison.”
- Successful reintegration of former prisoners into our communities enhances public safety, reduces recidivism, promotes the well-being of the former prisoners, families and our communities, and frees our tax dollars for other uses.

What does the Bible say?

Both the Old and the New Testament bear witness to God's concern for the poor, the vulnerable, and the needy:

- “Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, . . . who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. . . sets the prisoners free . . . [and] lifts up those who are bowed down” (Psalms 146:5-8 NRSV).

- The parable of the last judgment (Mt 25:31-46) teaches that to meet the needs of the poor, those who are hungry and thirsty, the outcast and oppressed, strangers and those in prison, is to serve Jesus and inherit eternal life.
- “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12 NRSV).

What does The United Methodist Church say?



- “In the love of Christ, who came to save those who are lost and vulnerable, we urge the creation of a genuinely new system for the care and restoration of victims, offenders, criminal justice officials, and the community as a whole . . . Through God's transformative power, restorative justice seeks to repair the damage, right the wrong, and bring healing to all involved . . . The Church is transformed when it responds to the claims of discipleship by becoming an agent of healing and systemic change.” *Social Principles of The United Methodist Church 2013-2016*, ¶164.
 - “Restorative justice practices should be utilized within the community as a first response to any criminal behavior. Justice can only prevail when there is healing of the victim, repentance of the offender, and when forgiveness and reconciliation are shared throughout the community.” *Book of Resolutions UMC 2012*, 5031.

What do You say?

- What you say depends on what you believe and know – keep growing in your faith and becoming more informed.
- Encourage your church to provide volunteers to minister to former inmates and their families by:
 - Helping them by providing food, clothing and transitional housing, and assisting them in obtaining employment.
 - Enabling them to be reunified with their families and welcomed in your church or another faith group.
 - Assisting them with getting access to education, health care, job skills training, social services and help for dealing with substance abuse and anger management.
 - Supporting them with transportation to work, church, and needed services.
 - Backing them with mentors who can provide friendship, guidance and support.
 - Advocating for and introducing restorative justice practices in your community.
 - Promote collaboration, coordination and partnership among government agencies, service providers, faith-based organizations, law enforcement agencies, courts, the community and family members to help ensure successful reentry.

For additional resources and information, contact either Glenn Rowley, Director of Justice and Missional Excellence, <GlennRowley@vaumc.org>; tel: 1.800.768.6040 / 804.521.1100, ext. 143 or Jim Templeton, Criminal Justice and Mercy Ministries Chair, Board of Church and Society, <jtemple354@comcast.net>; tel: 1-540-349.9623.