



# **Metanoia Prison Ministries’ Pre-Release Prisoner Reintegration Guide**

**A Handbook to Assist Discussion with  
Returning Citizens**

**Last Update: May 2020**



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*“The difference between a goal and a dream is a plan.”*

*Dave Ramsey*

*“A man’s heart devises his way, but the Lord directs his steps.”*

*Proverbs 16:9*



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## Foreword

This booklet is intended to be used by anyone working with prisoners who may at some time be released from prison. It is designed for you to assist the prisoner as they think about the important things of life waiting for them on the outside of the prison walls. While it is written from the perspective of Christians aiding other Christians, I expect that most of these principles and thoughts will apply to anyone of any faith. The need for this handbook was born out of the experience of our Community Mentoring Ministry at Walker State Prison in Rock Spring, GA, when mentors were challenged helping their mentees think both biblically and practically through how to approach their freedom after many years of incarceration.

Keep in mind this is not an all-inclusive document. You can go online to find numerous well-written documents and handbooks allowing them to delve much further into detail on the subject. Many states have pre-release handbooks for prisoners posted on-line for family and public use so they can see exactly what the prisoner is being issued and is expected to think through. This guide simply gives those who have never been incarcerated themselves a broad understanding of the issues facing prisoners as they think through release. It is meant to provide a starting point for conversation with returning citizens and drive them to prayer. In addition, churches often receive calls or letters from prisoners or their families without having any reference point from which to ascertain returning citizens' needs. We hope this will assist those who are helping prisoners with reentry in making such needs assessments.

Part of the process of aiding a prisoner in their reintegration process is helping that person think realistically about their future. You can tell a lot about a person based on their answers to a few questions. For example, if you ask the person, "What is your greatest need upon release from prison?" you may get several different answers such as: "a job", "a place to stay", "a car", or "clothes". While each of these needs are important and serious, they aren't the greatest need of the released person. Jesus taught us in Matthew 6:25-34 that we aren't to be anxious or worry about food, clothing, etc. Rather, we are to "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you." Where do we find the kingdom of God expressed in our communities? It is in the local church. The released prisoner's greatest need is to find a local church and to get plugged into it as far in advance of their actual release as they possibly can. This question in particular can reveal a lot about a person's spiritual maturity.



I offer to you that the sooner a person can find a local church in the community where they will be released, the better off they will be. It doesn't matter if the prisoner is serving a life sentence, or 25 years, or four years. If they can find a church in their area and even begin corresponding with them while they are still on the inside, their transition to the outside will be all the smoother.

This handbook is written from my own personal experience having spent 15 years of a life sentence inside state prison. Prison is where I came to understand God's great saving grace, His mercy, and His call upon my life to serve the prisoner through Christ's bride the Church. It is where I met and courted my lovely wife. It was where I was mentored for 14 years by a godly man who walked with me every step of the way. It is my greatest hope that this might help you as a mentor be that godly person to a Christian prisoner whose burdens you gladly will share for their benefits and God's glory.

Mark Casson

Director of Prison Ministries, Presbyterian Church in America

Executive Director, Metanoia Prison Ministries

## Introduction

### The Church: And Such Were Some of You

One of the most foundational principles of a successful relationship with returning citizens is to acknowledge and keep in view the sameness we share as we together walk in our redemption. While the circumstances of past sin and incarceration bring specific challenges to sanctification, the issues of heart and faith are not different in kind from that of any believer in the pew.

*"If we believe that the blood of Christ cleanses us from all unrighteousness, then this includes felonious unrighteousness."*

- Mark Casson, TableTalk Magazine January 2019



The very nature of the church is its existence as the community of those redeemed from their own unbelief, disobedience, and harm:

*"He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."*  
(Colossians 1:13)

*"...our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. (Titus 2:13-14)*

When addressing the congregation(s) in Corinth, having named idolaters, thieves, the greedy, substance abusers, those of scornful dispositions, swindlers, and the sexual immoral as those who would not inherit the kingdom of God, the Apostle wrote the following:



*“...and such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”*  
*(1 Corinthians 6:11)*

Therefore, the mindset of the church ought not be: “You’re the broken one, and we’re here to fix you.” Rather, the church should adopt a posture that says, “By His grace, we’re in this together for the glory of God. We, together, need the same Gospel transformation.”

### **When Should a Prisoner Start Planning for Their Parole?**

Practically speaking, there are basically two types of prisoners: those who dream about parole and those to plan their parole. It has been our experience that the latter type are those who generally succeed while on parole, while the former find themselves back in jail asking, “What happened?”

One of the things we want to do is to help our returning citizens develop good parole plans. We want them to think through some of the issues they may face. We don’t want them to walk out into a strange environment, be faced with major issues, and begin making bad decisions because they weren’t prepared for what they were facing. While we can’t account for every contingency, we can help prisoners think through things that we know they will face and help them prepare to make decisions when their feet hit the ground outside of the fence.

The first question we want to ask is: how long before a prisoner is released should they be thinking about their release and making preparations? The answer is: the first day of their incarceration. A prisoner needs to be thinking about and praying about their release for as long as they can prior to their release. There are individuals who plan for their parole 15 or more years in advance, and it is those people who seem to have the most success. However, in many instances, prisoners will begin really thinking about parole when they are six months or a year away from going home. Some actually wait until they are in a pre-release “90 days to the house” class. In most of these cases, they are simply too late. If a person waits until they are 90 days or six months to going home to start preparing for release, you can bet they will most likely be back. In fact, there seems to be a correlation between the length of time served and recidivism, as well as the length of time preparing for release and recidivism. In many cases, these two things go hand in hand.



The recidivism rate, or the rate at which prisoners reoffend, is above 60% after the first three years of release. However, that number begins to decline if you look at 10-year, 20-year, and life sentences. To demonstrate this point, let's look at some stats. If we look at the statistics for California for the year 2004, the year Executive Director Mark Casson was released, we see some interesting things. For the crimes which resulted in a life sentence, the recidivism rate was extremely low at 2.7% (two out of 72 lifers released reoffended within two years). If you look at a couple of other crimes for which lengthy sentences were served, you would find lower recidivism rates (i.e., Vehicular Manslaughter - 19%, Attempted Murder 2nd Degree - 30.21%). As we begin looking at crimes in which the sentence is lower, we will see the recidivism rates rise drastically—i.e., Burglary 2nd Degree (58%) and Receiving Stolen Property (62.65%).

Stop and think about this for a minute. The longer the sentence, the less likely someone is to return. Why is this so? There are several factors at play. One of them is maturity. A 20-year-old who serves 25 years is much more likely to be mature than a 20-year-old who serves three years and is released. In addition to maturity, there is the desire to live a normal life outside of the prison walls. The person who does a long sentence wants to “toe the line” so that they can enjoy the world that they missed while they were inside. In many cases, there is an active faith that plays a role in things. Of the thousands of prisoners (serving either a life sentence or a sentence greater than 20 years) that Metanoia has come into contact with, an overwhelming majority practice a major religion. Finally, because of the necessary steps to gain release in many states for life prisoners, they have spent a great deal of their time planning for their release, unlike the short termers.

If your returning citizen hasn't developed a parole plan yet, then now is the time to begin asking them about it. Why haven't they developed one? When do they plan on developing one? Do they plan on preparing a plan? If they answer “no” to any of these questions, don't be afraid to lovingly hit them with a dose of reality. Without a parole plan, they most likely won't succeed once released. As we all know, life is fluid and there are always things happening for which we can't plan. However, walking out of prison with no plan in place for even the basic things is like a high-school baseball player trying to get a home run off of a major league pitcher. One or two in a hundred might succeed, but the deck is stacked against them.

## Part I: Establishing a Pre-Release Relationship

### Finding a Church While Still Inside

If, on the counsel of Metanoia Prison Ministries, a chaplain, or another volunteer, a believer-still-detained seeks out your church because it is in the location of his or her targeted release, they are doing the right thing! Relationship before release is deeply fruitful to successful integration after release.

When the believer first interacts with folks face-to-face, they will not be such a stranger and unknown and threatening commodity. Likewise, instead of the almost automatic anticipation of rejection, the believer will have a better sense that they have already been in fellowship. While life sentences are higher in percentage in certain states (California, Utah and Louisiana standing out), for very many states our communities can expect well more than 80% of prisoners returning to society at some point.<sup>1</sup> If your church has opportunity to interact with a believing inmate long before release, that's a privilege.



### What Should a Pre-Release Relationship Look Like?

First and foremost, a pre-release relationship should have some structure. A discipleship track like what Metanoia provides in its [Bible Study Correspondence program](#) helps in three ways (other chosen resources could also give this structure).

1. It keeps interaction regular. Monthly (or even more frequent) interaction is desirable.
2. It gives direction to conversation. Metanoia's program constantly asks the head/heart/hands questions. Does the brother or sister understand the principles of truth there before them in the Word? Are those principles believed and embraced in the heart (not just the head)? What is the outworking of those truths in practical walk of faith?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/california-leads-nation-life-sentences-new-bill-aims-change>; accessed 4/7/2020



3. It sets the scene to make discipleship inquiry a natural (as opposed to a threatening) part of relationship. It's good to establish an atmosphere of agreement that inquiry into spiritual well-being is perfectly ordinary.

However, while engaging in active discipleship is an important part of building a pre-release relationship, it is important to take a holistic approach to assessing the prisoner's needs. Especially as the prisoner's parole date approaches, it is crucial to begin nudging and coming alongside the prisoner in their exit-planning process. The following sections of this workbook will walk through many of the most important practical matters to work through with a prisoner in planning for their release.

## Part II: Finding a Church

In the foreword, it was stated that finding a church community is the most important thing for a returning citizen. If the prisoner knows what city or town they are going to be released in, then the first thing that we can do for them is to help them find a church before they are released. It doesn't matter if the person has a life sentence or only two years left, finding them a church before they are released should be a top priority. If the prisoner only has two months left before release, we can still find a church for them and hopefully they can, at the very



least, write a letter of introduction to the church, share their faith, let them know that they have been disciplined and have served the Church on the inside, ask the church to pray for them, and let them know that they plan on visiting the church their first Sunday out.

Some may argue with me on this point, but I can't stress it enough: the more time the prisoner has to communicate with someone (or several people) at the church and to get to know the church and be known by the church, the better their transition will be.

One of the things which really hurt prisoners when they are released is the lack of a church family to go to. Think about this for a minute. A person is in prison and is a Christian. They spend hours per day with their fellow Christians in worship, and they are involved in the church community in the prison wherever they are. If they have no place to go when they are released, this is a major blow to their normal routine and way of life. If, however, they have been writing to someone at a church for the past two years, are released, can call that person on their first or second day out, and go to the church their first Sunday out, what a joy it will be for both the church and for the newly released returning citizen! A member of the family, who the church has gotten to know for the past two years, is coming home. I have seen this play out many times, and it is joyous each time. It is one less thing that the prisoner has to worry or think about.



If the prisoner is at all like I was, they may not know what type of church they want to attend because they've never been to anything other than a chapel before. Maybe they know they are Baptist; however, there are many different sub-denominations of Baptists alone (Southern Baptist, American Baptist, Reformed Baptist, Missionary Baptist, etc.). We can ask as many questions as we need to and, hopefully, we will be able to find a church close to where they are paroling. Moreover, we can provide assistance in reaching out to the pastor to find a point of contact for the prisoner to write. Again, if the prisoner is a lifer who hasn't even gone to his first hearing yet, they can still begin a relationship with a church. I know cases in which church membership is extended to the prisoner while they are still in prison. Imagine how such a church will come alongside the returning brother or sister once they are released if they will write to them and pray for them a decade beforehand!

Finding a church for the prisoner should be the first thing we address. If your church fits the bill, wonderful! However, if you are struggling to find a suitable church or cannot do it, please contact one of Metanoia's Regional Directors with respect to their region. We cannot stress enough just how important it is for the prisoner to develop contacts with the local church in their community. At the end of this handbook in the Appendix, there is a sample introductory template that can be used to assist the prisoner in writing that first letter should they need the help.

Let the prisoner write the first letter. It is their responsibility. Do not be doing for the prisoner what they should be doing for themselves. This is their introduction, their testimony and their future. They should invest in it personally, themselves. You can serve as a sounding board or an editor, but the letter should express their voice.

## Part III: Show Me Your Papers! (Identification)

In the post-9/11 world, identification became very important. One need only walk downtown in any town or city to find people everywhere with identification hanging around their necks. Go into any retail chain from Walmart to Target to Macy's and you will easily identify the employees because they have their IDs hanging around their necks.

There aren't too many things a person can do these days without a photo ID. You can't cash a check, rent a hotel room, buy a bus ticket or purchase many cold/flu medications without a photo ID. In most cases, you won't be able to get a job without valid photo ID. Not having an ID is not grounds for arrest, but a police officer could detain you until they can establish your ID. In other words, it is important for a person to get proper ID as soon as they possibly can upon release.



In order to get any state photo ID, whether a driver's license or just a photo ID, a person must be able to establish their identity. This can be done with a birth certificate and social security card. The birth certificate must be the original or a certified copy. If a person doesn't have one, they can write to their respective state-of-birth's relevant office and get one while they are still inside. They should not wait to get one until they are out. If a person was born in the State of Georgia, for example, they can write:

*Georgia Department of Public Health, Vital Records  
2600 Skyland Drive, NE  
Atlanta, GA 30319-3640*

If the prisoner was born in another state, you can find out easily online where they can write. Most, if not all, states charge a fee for the birth certificate—in Georgia, it is \$25. The prisoner should be sure to specify that they want a **certified copy**. If you or your church wants to assist the prisoner in securing a certified copy, that is fine. However, as per Metanoia's policies, it is important to note that those engaged in our mentoring program may not engage in a financial relationship of any sort with a mentee while they are incarcerated—meaning mentors may not



purchase the birth certificate on the mentee's behalf. As a general rule, it is best to leave the details and letter writing up to the prisoner or their family, which may mean that the prisoner must enlist family or friends to cover the cost of a certified copy of the birth certificate. You can also check with the prison Chaplain or other prison staff to find the best means of accomplishing this in the absence of family or friends on the outside.

Obtaining a social security card may be a little more difficult if the prisoner has lost the original. They may need to correspond with a local Social Security Administration office and apply for a duplicate card, providing them with the necessary documentation. One document that will be needed is a birth certificate. Medical records can also be used.

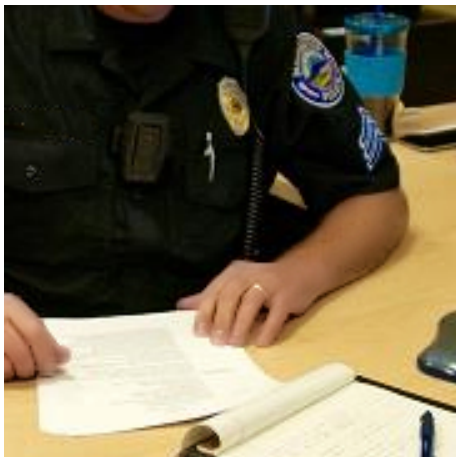
If the prisoner knows where these two documents are, their birth certificate and their social security card, make sure that they are accessible **the day they are released** from prison. If they have an expired photo ID from the past, or an old military ID, then these may be helpful to them in getting their official photo ID.

You and the prisoner should plan to seek advice from the staff at the prison, as many prisons already have standing programs to assist the prisoner in getting these essential documents.

## **Part IV: Past Sins (Warrants, Registries, Affiliations)**

How bad would it be for someone to serve twenty years, get to a facility where they are preparing to transfer out, only to find out that they have a parole hold or warrant in another state which is going to prevent their release? Sound farfetched? It isn't. It has happened to those we have worked with previously, and it happens far too often all around the country.

There are several reasons why something like this happens. First off, after serving a lengthy sentence, most prisoners may have forgotten that they had engaged in other criminal activity prior to their incarceration. In many cases, prisoners may not even know that they are



suspects in other crimes or that warrants had been issued for their arrest. Prisoners who used drugs prior to their incarceration may have engaged in crimes while they were high and have no memory of those offenses. They may have long forgotten unpaid traffic violations. Perhaps records from five, ten, or twenty years ago were not well kept or errors were made in the bureaucratic handling of paperwork. Any of these things will trigger a red flag and lead to possible problems.

Every prisoner, whether a lifer or not, ought to know whether they have warrants outstanding. While incarcerated, they can file paperwork to find out about any warrants that they might have. They can talk to their counselor about it, and they can most likely find some help in the prison's law library. It is always best to check, even if this is their first offense and they haven't been living a life of crime. One never knows when one might be a suspect in a case simply because they fit a profile or match a description given by a witness.

Taking care of outstanding warrants doesn't take a lot of work, but it is an oft-overlooked issue that can cause many problems for a person who expects to go home on a certain day but is then detained pending transfer to the county where the warrant is, goes to the county jail, and sits there pending adjudication of things. This can drag out for weeks and months but could've been handled by the prisoner while they were serving their sentence.

It is important to note that it is always in the prisoner's best interest to handle warrants while they are serving a sentence. When a prisoner is in prison, they can demand a trial on any



warrant that is outstanding. Officials will then have to decide to prosecute the prisoner which will incur the cost of transporting a convicted felon to their county or dropping the charges. In many cases, if they prosecute, the sentence will run concurrent with the sentence they are currently serving. If they wait until they are released and then go and fight the new case, they will be sent back to prison if they are convicted.

Beyond outstanding warrants, it is important, in planning for release, to know what future restrictions a returning citizen will face as a result of their crime. For example, anyone who will be a registered sex offender (RSO) will have living restrictions placed upon them when they are released. The law in Georgia says, “No sex offender may live, work or loiter within 1000 feet of any school, childcare facility, school bus stop, or place where minors congregate.” These words are intentionally vague. This could mean that an RSO won’t be able to live near a park, or near a McDonalds if they have a play place. One thousand feet is just under a fifth of a mile. If the returning citizen is an RSO, they will need to be looking for their housing somewhere that fits this criterion. It should be noted that churches could easily be considered as places where minors congregate, especially if there is a youth group or a playground at the church facility.

A final consideration regarding a prisoner’s past sins is determining whether or not they were once gang affiliated. Unlike other types of social clubs, it is difficult to make any sound argument which makes the Christian life compatible with ongoing gang activity; therefore, we assume that the affiliation is no longer active. With that in mind, it is important to gauge a returning citizen’s potential past affiliations on several fronts.

- First, were they affiliated, and if so, with whom? Is that gang active in the returning citizen’s county of release?
- Second, how long ago did they leave the gang? Did they get out long ago, or are they still one foot in and one foot out? Will members of their gang try and convince them to resume gang-related activities? Will there be any competition over the returning citizen’s affection between the gang and the church?
- Third, did they serve in any leadership capacity within their gang? Although once perverted in use, leadership skills learned on the street can be transferred over directly in service of the church. Have they commanded thirty men before? Maybe they can be groomed to lead a disaster response team in the future. No one’s past is outside of God’s transforming power. “[If] the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36).

## **Part V: Developing a Residence Plan (Housing)**

For a prisoner to be released they must provide an acceptable address to the parole authorities demonstrating they have a place to reside. This is part of the parole planning process. Some will go to a transition facility for a season. Some will go to their parents' home, or back to their own home to live with spouses or children.

Many states, in reviewing parole for prisoners, place a lot of emphasis on the residence plan that the prisoner submits. The prisoner needs to make sure that they have fully completed the residence plan and submitted every aspect of where they plan to live, with whom they plan to live, and all the parties that will be living in the residence and their relationship to the prisoner.



The parole authorities will look at the residence plan in light of the prisoner's commitment and past offenses. They may deny parole if a convicted drug offender plans on moving into a neighborhood or area that is known to be a high-drug crime area. They will not allow a registered sex offender to parole to an apartment complex that is next door to the neighborhood youth center. The parole authorities will look more favorably upon release if someone who has a drug-related crime plans on living near a drug treatment facility, or in proximity to a place where drug services such as Narcotics Anonymous meetings are held. Likewise, they will look more favorably at a residence plan that includes proximity to public transportation in the likely event that the prisoner won't have their own transportation immediately upon release.

The parole board also looks at what sort of living environment the prisoner will be released into. In other words: is the living environment a stable one or an unstable one? A stable living environment is one in which the people who live in the home aren't engaged in illegal

activity or in drug or alcohol abuse. The prisoner should seek a stable residence in which the other occupants are seeking stable social lives and are productive members of their communities.

You can assist the prisoner in developing a solid residence plan. Some things to be taken into consideration are:

- proximity to public transportation
- proximity to employment
- proximity to church
- proximity to social services and parole department
- proximity to drug or alcohol meetings, or support ministries.

There are, however, some men and women who don't have a place to return to. They will need to find a half-way house, rescue mission, or some other residence where they can sleep once they are out of the prison system. In many cases, their case manager at the prison can help with this. If you need help locating transitional living facilities, please contact one of our Regional Directors (p. 2).

One conversation a you may want to have with a prisoner concerns what it will be like to again live in a home with a spouse and children present. If the prisoner has been away for five years, and their spouse has stayed with them, their spouse will have been running the home without them for five years. They will have had to make decisions about finances, the children, the home, etc. without their spouse's input. Even in the cases where the prisoner can give input, the decisions made likely don't directly affect them. Similarly, their children will have lived for five years without one of their parents in the home. The prisoner shouldn't expect that they can come home after five years away and pick up right where things were five years ago. There will be an adjustment period for everyone involved. It will be good to talk through, as well as something about which you should be aware.

It is interesting to note that this is a huge source of problems for men and women who return to homes which have been running in their absence. It can be especially difficult for returning men who attempt to reclaim control as "king of the castle" despite the fact that their wives have long taken over all responsibilities in their absence. It is important for the husband and wife to talk about things before he comes home, as well as talk about them during the first weeks and months after release.

## Part VI: One, Two, and Seven Days (First Week Out)

### Practical Matters

A great question to ask a returning citizen is, “What does your first day of release look like?” How they answer will give you insight into how much they have thought about their release. Have they thought about some of the basic things that will happen on that first day out? If a prisoner is being released from Walker State Prison in NW Georgia, for example, how will they get down to Valdosta, GA (7 hours away) if that is where they plan to reside? What meals will they eat for breakfast, lunch and dinner on that first day? How will they pay for those meals and transportation to their final destination?

Many prisoners are released with a bus ticket to where they are going, along with a debit card that has \$25 on it for them to use for meals or other expenses. It should be noted that family members or friends can pick the prisoner up. Arrangements to do so must be made in advance of



the release date. If you are a state certified and badged volunteer planning to transport the now former prisoner upon release, make sure you are not in violation of any prison or state rules. **You may not be allowed to meet the returning citizen at the gate!** Every state is different, so be sure you are doing things properly and in order. Many prisoners have not given a second thought to the question of what happens on day one or day two after release. They may be thinking about getting a Big Mac and some french fries rather than the more serious issues pertaining to their release, such as getting an ID and beginning to search for a job.

Within the first week of release, the freshly released person has a multitude of tasks to accomplish. The first is getting from the prison to where they are going to reside. After that, they will want to prioritize things like procuring state-issued identification, purchasing some basic toiletries such as soap, toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, shampoo, etc. Next will come some basic clothing necessities such as underwear, socks, and clothing items suitable for job



interviews. Some of these items can be purchased at Goodwill, Salvation Army, or other thrift stores for far less than what a retail store charges. There may be related, additional resources available to the returning citizen which they should attempt to research prior to release. In some cities, there are networks of churches and organizations who work together to provide clothing, temporary housing, necessities, bus passes, etc. Perhaps you or your church could have a bag of basic toiletries ready to give to the prisoner upon their release. Depending on how far away from the release facility the person plans to live, they may be able to get the basic cosmetics/toiletries on their very first day of release. Please note that if you plan on being there on their first day out of prison and you decide to take them shopping, it may take several hours for them to purchase the basics. This is because anyone who has been in prison for any length of time hasn't had to decide between 50 types of soap, shampoos, and deodorants.

Somewhere in that first week has to include church worship. It is important for the returning citizen to know what time church is on Sunday, what the address of the church is, and how they will get there. If they are planning on taking public transportation to the church, they will need to plan that accordingly to allow for travel time.

There are really two types of people who leave prison. There are those who hit the ground running and want to go to work as soon as they are released and to begin their new life outside the prison walls. Then there are others who will want and need to take a few days to decompress and spend time with loved ones, or perhaps even alone. Ask the returning citizen what their thoughts are about this so that you know when they are released what their need or desire is.

### **Culture Shock**

Especially for someone has been in prison for a significant length of time, your alertness to how challenging the culture shift is can be a great encouragement to the returning citizen. Here are a few things to keep in mind regarding major shocks upon release:

1. Be sensitive if an inmate is uncomfortable with crowds.
2. Know that some inmates will face a retreat-to-isolation reflex in response to pressures or discomforts, pulling away to a bedroom or other room almost as though it were a cell.

3. Time can often feel more fleeting and ragged, since so many things on the inside were prescribed and delineated.

4. The outside may seem like an overwhelming place full of a never-ending barrage of choices.

5. Though inmates can stay fairly current

with news because of television access, the life-experience of changes in culture may be radically different, after having missed 10, 15 or 20 years (developments in technology, in particular).

6. Cellphones and screen-based entertainment (games, chat apps, YouTube, or endless Netflix series) can easily consume a person, especially because it is such an easy default alternative to any challenging task or investment of personal thought and energies (even we on the outside know that, don't we?).

7. The 24/7 availability of pornography via phone and internet access is a radical challenge, given that, on the inside, sexually explicit content is considered contraband and therefore harder to obtain.



### **Fellowship Upon Release**

The presence of friendship and discipleship interactions inside is often more frequent than we on the outside can imagine. It's not unusual for groups of incarcerated believers to get together with one another on the yards or in the day-rooms 5 out of 7 days in any week



(sometimes more!). Upon release, life on the outside, can rapidly feel lonely. Returning citizens may be plunged into a new lifestyle where, for instance, they might get up, get things together, work all day, come home, get food, clean up, pay bills, watch the news, and drop into bed all without having any meaningful interactions.



While work and life schedules can be a complication, urge the returning citizen to consistently attend weekly and mid-week worship and fellowship gatherings. If two persons from the church (and two are much better than one) could commit to once- or twice-weekly fellowship interactions, that reliable resource of face-to-face interaction can serve as a fundamental part of the returning citizen's successful, positive reintegration into society. Those fellowship times can be structured in conjunction with mid-week groups, but it's important to have other personal elements of those interactions, such as lunch, dinner, or a cup of coffee.

We cannot stress enough: be on high alert to watch out for loneliness-related dangers. Overwhelming feelings of loneliness can drive individuals into destructive coping habits. Problematic romantic relationships and returning to substance abuse are powerful temptations under the stress of feeling alone.

## Part VII: Finding Employment

An important part of reintegration planning will include discussions with the prisoner regarding their previous work experience outside of the prison walls, as well as what they have done while inside. All of their work experience is important when they begin the process of looking for employment upon release.

While they are still inside, the prisoner should prepare their resume. Having a resume is very important and it is something they should walk out of prison with. Of course, they will need to update it every few years until they are released, but having it is still important. You may be able to help them in



preparing their resume, and Metanoia Prison Ministries offers a free returning citizens employment search workbook called [Loving and Trusting God in the Job Search](#) that has been tailored for the prisoner. The prisoner also should collect pertinent documents such as their high school diploma or GED, and any other degrees or certificates that they have earned which an employer might ask them to provide.

Another discussion you will want to have is a realistic look at the prisoner's job prospects once they are released. If a prisoner was a schoolteacher and was involved in an inappropriate sexual relationship with a student, they need to realize that they aren't going to teach again. Likewise, a person who has no current computer skills probably won't want to think about getting an office job where computer skills will be needed on the first day. *However, a person should be willing to take any job they can get so long as they can do the work.*

If the prisoner has never had a job in society before, you may want to spend quite a bit of time covering such topics as dressing for application submission, dressing for an interview, follow up phone calls after application submission, and the actual interview process. Perhaps, should you have the opportunity to visit the prisoner, you could conduct a mock interview with the them and give pointers in areas they need to work on.



Most prisoners have jobs while in prison. Be sure to remind them to include any employment they had while in prison on their resume. This can be a great asset to returning citizens looking for work. For example, a person who was the lead cook in culinary has the experience to run a restaurant kitchen.

One thing that is important is for the prisoner to be positive about employment. If a person goes into the job search with a defeatist attitude, they most likely won't find the job they are looking for. However, if they go into the job search loving and trusting God in the process, believing that they have something to bring to a business, they will be more likely to find employment.

The prisoner should be encouraged to use their incarceration as a positive in their life rather than a negative. They should be encouraged to know how to tell their story plainly and



truthfully. What is meant by this is that incarceration need not be a negative, and the prisoner ought not to think that everyone they come in contact with is going to treat them negatively because of their record. More employers are beginning to see that ex-prisoners make great workers. Ex-prisoners want to make up for lost time and they have a lot to lose

if they lose their jobs, so their incentive to work and to do a good job is greater than that of the average person. In addition, surviving incarceration is, in some ways, like surviving combat, and people respect folks who have gone through such things.

The Christian, in particular, has character that comes with knowing God and being the temple of the Holy Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit is Christian character. Encourage them by letting them know that employers would rather hire persons with character and teach them skills rather than hire people with skills and hope they have character. Nothing will prepare a person better for the job search and facing rejection without anxiety than maturing in Christ, throwing themselves upon Providence and loving and trusting God each step of the way.



Prisoners should be encouraged to look for specific jobs in areas they love or for which they are skilled, but not to turn down a job because it is entry level, or because they think it is “beneath” them. There are certain companies which have historically been friendly to the returning citizen, such as McDonald’s and Target. Within each metropolitan area, there are also local businesses which are willing to hire an ex-felon. The parole department often has a list. You can help by providing lists of companies where returning citizens can apply given their interests and experience. There are an increasing number of national websites offering advice to the returning ex-felons and listing companies that are “felon friendly”. Remember we talked about the importance of finding a church while men and women are in prison? Many jobs are found through networking through their new churches.

Many cities and public institutions are removing the “Have you ever been convicted of a felony?” checkbox from applications. If applications do have that, many counselors will suggest that the returning prisoner simply not put anything down and be prepared to discuss their situation face to face. If electronic applications cannot be processed until all boxes are filled, then the ex-offender must check “yes”. Do not lie. We no longer abide by the ways of “the father of lies”. If Jesus is Lord of all, that means He is also the Lord of the marketplace. Let us live and act like we understand His complete sovereignty. He wills and works in us for His good pleasure. What perspective and even joy this brings to the job search.



## Part VIII: The Parole Officer / Agency

Getting paroled can be frightening. Most prisoners have heard too many stories of how the parole officers are out to get you and how they are just waiting for you to slip up so they can bust you. However, take Mark Casson's experience as an example:

*"As one who served five years of High Control parole in California, I can honestly say that this isn't true. I had also heard the rumors and was expecting my parole officer to be a vulture waiting for me to slip up, but what I found was just the opposite. I found that as I lived my life to honor God and obeyed the rules, the parole officer was never a problem and often times helpful when I needed help. I saw people who were not respectful to the parole agents and who continued with poor choices and bad behaviors, and they were the people who ended up back in prison. Never once did I encounter any difficulty with a parole agent. I even had one agent who didn't like me and told me so, but I followed the rules and there was nothing she could do to me. Thankfully, I only had her for a month!"*

The parole authorities are not out to get anyone. They have their place in the justice system, and if a person does what they are supposed to do, the parolee should have no problems. It is advisable for the returning citizen's family, church, and friends to get to know the parole authorities. The goal of the parole authorities is to assist the returning citizen so that they have the optimum chance for successful reentry. Often, when Parole Officers see a returning citizen with a support network in place, they will act favorably toward that person.

**The prisoner will be given a set of parole instructions before they are released**, along with the name of their parole officer. In the State of Georgia, the prisoner has 24 hours to report to the parole department in person. Failure to do so, except under extraordinary circumstances, will be a violation of parole. Remind the returning citizen that Christians respect authority because all authority is given by God. Dealing with parole authorities simply is one of the consequences of our sins. Even getting through the parole period living well by faith will be a great Christian witness to many in the system.



## **Part IX: Veterans' Benefits**

The prisons in the United States are filled with veterans. Some of the prisoners served honorably, were discharged and then committed crimes. In other cases, a person was serving on active duty or in the reserves and committed a crime. No matter what the scenario, a prisoner who is also a veteran may be eligible for veterans' benefits. This can be a huge blessing upon release!

If a person is a veteran of the Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force or Coast Guard, and they have an honorable discharge, their veteran's benefits will have been suspended while they were in prison, but they can get them once they are released. If the veteran received a discharge under conditions other than honorable but not dishonorable and they have the required amount of time in service, they may also be eligible for benefits. Even if a person has a dishonorable discharge, if they "re-upped" (i.e. served more than a single term), then they have eligibility for benefits. For example, a nine-year veteran of the Marine Corps who was convicted of a crime and given a dishonorable discharge should still be eligible for benefits because they would have two prior honorable discharges. It's always best to check.

The returning citizen who falls into either of these categories should make it a priority to visit their nearest Veteran's Administration within the first days or weeks of their release. There are many benefits available to veterans and some of these could be crucial for successful reentry. Some of these benefits are educational opportunities, GI Bill, medical and dental care, housing assistance, job placement assistance, job training, and assistance with purchasing tools needed for employment. These are benefits that a person has earned through their service to their country and the returning citizen ought to take advantage of them if they can.



## **Part X: Staying Healthy**

In some ways, prison preserves a person. People in prison typically aren't using drugs, tobacco, and alcohol like people in the world do. In addition, their diet is regulated by the authorities in a major way and most prisoners spend a good deal of time exercising. For all of these reasons, prisoners tend to be healthier when they leave prison than they were when they entered prison.

Prisoners therefore have to be careful when they leave prison. The food that is available to them out here is much worse for them than what they had inside, so the risk of gaining a lot of weight is high. In addition to the food being worse for them, there is a lot more of it available to them. We've seen a lot of prisoners get released in the past 25 years, and we don't know too many of them who were able to keep up with physical workouts on a regular basis like they did inside the prison. Many struggled with putting on significant weight. As a result of this combination, coupled with the stress of readjusting to society, returning citizens tend to find themselves developing medical issues within the first couple of years of their release. High blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol, and heart issues are just some of the things which affect parolees. Prisons also have high instances and rates of tuberculosis, hepatitis C, and sexually transmitted infections. Tuberculosis is an airborne disease, and hepatitis C is transmitted through blood to blood contact. If the prisoner ever received any tattoos or shared a needle during drug use, they are at very high risk for having hepatitis C. Knowing about it could save their life.

It is good to encourage the returning citizen to get a complete physical once they are released. Furthermore, preparing and encouraging the returning citizen to consider how to make healthy choices before their release may save them from significant health issues down the road.



## **Part XI: Becoming a Contributing Member of the Church and Community (Best Practices)**

Always seek to cultivate initiative in the returning citizen. One rule of thumb is: don't do for them what they can themselves do. Engage things with them and alongside them, especially those things that are unfamiliar, but encourage initiative. Yes, some essentials (e.g., a coat or a month's bus pass) and direct assistance (e.g., a ride to the DMV or help in setting up a bank account) can be provided, but there is a very wholesome affirmation in recognizing the God-given capacity in them to take care of things.

For many returning citizens, budgeting is new ground. Nearly full-time work on the inside (5 days / 7hrs. per day) can yield as little as \$ 12.25 - \$49.00 per month, so there may be quite a gap of time since they have had to plan about rent, utilities, phone, food, gas and auto repairs, insurance, etc. Take note, too, that if one has lived with desperately few possessions for a long time, there may be a strong temptation to blow dollars that come in.

In Lennie Spitale's excellent book *Prison Ministry: Understanding Prison Culture Inside and Out*, he says, "One of the worst things a...church can do for a person who is just coming out of prison is to put him into the spotlight too early." Mr. Spitale advocates giving returning citizens "the wise encouragement of taking the necessary time to get their feet planted firmly on the ground."

However, the above counsel does not mean that prisoner should be engaged in no service at all! In fact, active, positive contributions to their community can serve as a vital piece in a returning citizen's successful reintegration. Moreover, there is nothing so affirming as being called upon to serve. Rather, it's engaging in the limelight, testimony-tour, teacher-role kinds of service that can trip someone up before they have had adequate time to adjust.



## **Part XII: A Reintegration Checklist and Assessment**

If you have made it this far, you will see that there are many things to consider when planning for release. Knowing this, we have developed a tool that anyone working with returning citizens can use in order to make sure they have given thought to many of the major components of a successful release. The assessment may be mailed directly to the prisoner for them to fill out, or it may be used by those working with prisoners as a general guide to work through questions with them. While the assessment is too large to place in this booklet, a printer-friendly version can be found on our website at <http://www.metanoiaprisonministries.org/reintegration>.



## **Conclusion**

We are sure there are more items that we haven't covered or things which are specific to a particular prisoner. However, these are the broad strokes and the most important things that you will want to work through with returning citizens. If there is something that comes up in the course of conversation that you are not familiar with or don't know the answer to, please contact us at Metanoia Prison Ministries. If we don't know the answers, we can check with prison or parole officials, or direct you to persons and places where you might find answers. You can contact any of us, respective to your region, at any time. All of our contact information is list on Page 2 of this document.

We are thankful to God that you have felt the call to "remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison" (Hebrews 13:3). We pray that the Lord blesses you in your acts of love and service toward them. We pray that you would be blessed by the amazing gifts God has given to his own who will one day be released from prison. Above all, we pray that, whether on the inside or the outside of prison, the common unity with Christ that we share as believers would bind us together in such a great outflowing of love that the world would see and give glory to our wonderful God.





## **Appendix A: A Prisoner's Sample Letter to a Church**

November 7, 2014

Rev. John Smith  
Second Baptist Church  
Cumming, GA 22221

Dear Rev. Smith,

My name is Peter Piper, and I'm currently a prisoner at Walker State Prison in Rock Spring, GA. Three years ago, I was saved by Christ and have been growing in my faith ever since. One day I hope to live in Cumming, and I know that finding a church family is one of the most important things I can do. A friend of mine found your church for me and suggested you as the person I should contact. Thank you for being willing to hear from me.

I have been in prison for four years now on a 15-year sentence. I'm very ashamed that I committed assault with a deadly weapon and was involved in trafficking drugs. My parole review is scheduled for July of 2015. At that review, the parole board can do any number of things. They can set me off for one or more years, meaning that I will not get released, and won't even be able to be reconsidered for release for that amount of time. Or, they could grant me parole and I would be released sometime after that date.

While I am still a relatively young Christian, I take very seriously Jesus' words in Matthew 6 that we must "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these other things will be added to you". I believe it is of utmost importance for me to find a church family now, so that when I am released, I will leave prison knowing exactly where I will worship my first Sunday out.



Would you or someone in your church be willing to write me in order that we might get to know each other? If the Lord sees fit to release me in nine months, we will have that much time to get to know one another. If I am here for the entire 15 years, then I will need someone on the outside with whom I can correspond and who will help me increase my knowledge of God and grow in the Word.

I'm sure that you have many questions. I will be happy to answer them. My life is an open book. I pray that this is simply the first of many letters between us and the start of a long relationship.

Most sincerely,

Peter Piper, GDC#1234568

Walker State Prison

PO Box 123

Rock Spring, GA 12345