Visit Prison IN an [Envelope]

Paper, a stamp, and an envelope are all you need to reach one of the neediest mission fields in America ...

More than 2.3 million men and woman are locked away in America's prisons and jails. Most of them are desperate for contact with the outside world. Many have been forsaken by friends and even family members. They long for an expression of human concern.

You will find information on:
- How to find a Christ-centered pen pal organization
- What it takes to be a pen pal
- How to get started (we give you a sample first letter)
- How to share your faith with your pen pal
- How to disciple your pen pal
- Ways to prevent potential problems (do's and don'ts)
- How to handle typical concerns that may arise
- What prison life is like
- How to help your prisoner pen pal prepare for release

Prison Fellowship:
44180 Riverside Parkway, Lansdowne, VA 20176
(703) 478-0100, www.prisonfellowship.org
Introduction to this resource

“I was a prisoner and you came to visit me,”

says Jesus in Matthew 25:36. Then, to clarify His meaning to puzzled followers, He adds,

“I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”

Jesus identifies closely with the weak, the helpless, and the outcast. He calls us to serve them in the same way we would serve Him.

Not every Christian can visit prison in person, of course. But that’s not the only way to minister to a lonely man or women behind bars. It’s also possible to visit prison in an envelope—through a caring ministry of correspondence.

Prison Fellowship had a pen pal program for nearly 30 years, helping to match thousands of prisoners with caring Christian volunteers who offered them encouragement, connection with the outside world, and Christ-centered friendship.

In 2007, because of a shift in our mission, Prison Fellowship ceased its organized efforts to match new pen-pal relationships, although we continued to give support to existing pen-pal volunteers. Many of these correspondence relationships, built on a strong foundation, will continue effectively on their own.

We are thankful that there are several other organizations that help to match lonely prisoners with caring pen-pal friends, and we have provided a list in Chapter 3.

If you are or desire to become a pen pal to someone in prison, we are excited about this call to ministry! Although we can no longer directly match you with a prisoner, we still want to be a resource in helping you minister to a prisoner through correspondence.

This online booklet gives you guidance in how to contact a Christian pen-pal service, how to understand the prisoner personality, how to write that first letter, how to use correspondence as a venue for evangelism and discipleship, and how to handle typical problems that might come up.

The majority of this material was prepared by former Prison Fellowship staff Terry White and Debbie Fulmer, both of whom continue to have a deep commitment to prisoners as people created in God’s image and worthy of our care. Terry includes a description of his own experience as a pen pal to a prisoner as an encouragement to others.

So please read on to learn how you can visit prison in an envelope ... and help transform a prisoner’s life!
My Pen Pal Robert

Shortly after I joined the staff of Prison Fellowship in the fall of 1992, I felt it would be good to begin an in-depth correspondence with a specific prisoner. I felt I could learn a lot. I hoped it would be helpful in my general understanding of prisons and prisoners.

How true that proved to be!

I applied for a pen pal through Prison Fellowship’s Pen Pal Program and was assigned Robert. I knew only that he was imprisoned in Florida and that he had finished several years of college.

When we first connected, Robert had served three years of an eventual eight-year hitch. It was not his first time in prison, I was to learn.

He was a believer in Jesus Christ, so we had a common bond in the faith immediately. But we had virtually nothing else in common.

He is African-American.
I am white.

I am happily married.
He is not.

I have traveled quite a bit.
He has not.

He’s lived only in Florida.
I’ve lived mainly in the Midwest.

His interests are
sports, cars, and body building.
Not me.

He had a criminal record
(“habitual offender”).
I had almost no knowledge of “the system.”

But we were both reaching out for friendship. And it worked.

Over time, I came to love Robert deeply. He shared with me his daily schedule, his interpersonal tensions, and many of his fears and struggles.

He also shared with me scriptures he’d found, strength gained from resisting temptations, and occasional spiritual victories that thrilled both of us. He prayed for me, for my family, and for needs I shared with him.
I play piano, so I made a tape of Christian songs for his birthday and sent it off. He never got it. The prison administration refused it, and it disappeared.

Once he was silent for nearly a month. I later learned he’d been in an interpersonal conflict and spent time “in the hole” (administrative segregation), where he could neither send nor receive mail.

At one point he was angry with me, told me to quit writing, and said he didn’t want to hear from me anymore. I kept writing, and eventually he wrote

“Thank you for sticking with me.”

He had some bitter family disappointments. Someone promised to bring his son to visit him at Christmas. They never showed up—never notified him. That Christmas, he later told me, was the only Christmas card he received.

Our trust relationship grew. One Christmas he really wanted a pair of cross-trainer athletic shoes. So I learned his size, bought a pair, and sent them to his mother, who delivered them.

Robert and I searched together for post-release help as his outdate grew near. I contacted churches, ministries, social service agencies, and even friends who were in the South Florida area. I hoped to find someone to help this prisoner who would be pushed out the door of his prison with $100 in hand and one change of non-prisoner clothing. No transportation. No plans. No help of any kind.

There were times in our relationship when I became a little uncomfortable and unsure. How much family information should I reveal? Were there any risk factors that my wife and family needed to know?

Several times Robert wanted to call me collect. I said no. Was that wise, or right? I don’t know. Once he asked me to pay a subscription for him to a magazine. I did. Should I have? Maybe not. But it was a small gift that I gave to him in Jesus’ name, and I saw no harm in it.

Robert would obtain lovely greeting cards through the system, somehow, and would send them on special occasions. Once he even commissioned a prison artist to draw my portrait, copying it from a photo I had sent.

He was moved a number of times. Each time, there was a “hiccup” in our mail relationship, as letters were returned from the old prison, and it took time for him to get me his new address.

The pace of his letters increased with frantic intensity as he neared release. Then, when he was out, he telephoned me—at work. He assured me he wanted to stay connected as he got adjusted to life after prison.

It has now been a while since I’ve heard from Robert. I pray that he’s doing well … avoiding temptation … staying faithful to a job and to the Lord.

Robert will always be my special friend. I hope we can stay in touch for many years. In our four-and-a-half-year correspondence, I received 121 letters from him and answered each. That’s about one exchange every two weeks, which seems to be a pretty typical pace for a pen-pal relationship.
CHAPTER 2

The Value of Mail
Mail is important to prisoners. For some, letters from the outside are the only rays of light into their dark worlds.

One Iowa prisoner says,
“In here, letters are sacred. Mail is the one thing everyone is serious about.”

A Texas prisoner says,
“I place more value on letters and books from my pen pal than anything in the world.”

Tony, imprisoned in New York, says,
“Keeping in touch with the outside is very important ... prisoners need pen pals because some of us have no one out there to write to. Pen pals could save a life.”

Diana, a pen-pal volunteer from California, says,
“I have had the privilege of being a pen pal to prisoners for about 13 years, and have always felt the smile of the Lord upon me for this service. God has called me to build up the body as a nurse, Bible teacher, mother, and as a friend to prisoners. I believe ‘going into the prison’ through letter correspondence is an answer to the call of Christ to bring the Gospel to the lost.”

Pam and Blair, who correspond with four prisoners from their home in Missouri, say,
“When we started 13 years ago, we thought we would bring a little joy to these men behind bars. Instead, what a blessing we receive when letters come to us. Some of these men have given much more to us than we give them.”

The Prisoners’ Perspective
From the prisoners’ perspective, having a pen pal can be a key element in spiritual growth and in survival of the brutal prison experience.

Prisoner Sharon, writing about her pen pal Maria, says,
“Maria does encourage me to stay close to the Lord, and she sends tracts that she feels will help. But she does a lot more than that and this is what makes her special. I’m glad she’s the one who got my name. She does get closer, like a friend, and that’s hard to come by in prison.”

Prisoner James tells us,
“Through the mail we have gone through good times and bad times. But my friends have never let me down, and I’m really thankful that the Lord has allowed this friendship to grow. The encouragement and fellowship they have given to me is great, and they have helped me to develop a deeper relationship with Christ. They have been, and still are, a very important part of my life.”
Who Can Be a Pen Pal?

Because letter writing can be done any hour of the day or night, it fits well for those who work odd hours; or for those who juggle daytime schedules with occupations, children, spouses, and church activities; or for those who have limited ability to get out. Just about everyone can find a few minutes a couple times a month to write a letter.

But there is more to being a pen pal than just having time to write. What are the qualities of a good pen pal?

- **A pen pal needs to be stable, emotionally and spiritually.** The volatile environment of prisons means that prisoners often have roller-coaster emotions and experiences. The pen pal needs to be able to ride above the volatility and stick to the original purpose of spiritual encouragement.

- **A pen pal must be motivated for ministry.** There is little public glory attached to this ministry, but there can be great personal reward and treasures in heaven. “Doing unto the least of these” has its own particular brand of encouragement and satisfaction that comes from being obedient to God and His Word.

- **It is important to commit.** Follow-through is vital. It can be emotionally devastating for a prisoner to take the risk of writing and then not hear back, or to be rejected without good reason. Some pen-pal relationships continue for a decade or more, and some volunteers write to many prisoners simultaneously. This is a long-term friendship and discipleship ministry, not a short-range or “one-time” ministry.

- **Buoyancy is required.** The pen pal must not get discouraged easily. There may be months when the prisoner doesn’t respond. Gifts may return unopened or just disappear. You may be disappointed—prisoners relapse or tire if their personal agendas are not being filled. You may be assigned to two or three prisoners before finding one who results in a satisfying relationship. Stay at it. Do not be discouraged.

Now, motivated to minister, and understanding the commitment necessary, it’s time to look at how to get started.
Finding a Pen Pal

There are several ministries that match inmates to people who want to minister through correspondence. Some are local to a state or geographic area, while others are national in scope. A list can be found at the end of this chapter.

We strongly recommend that you work through one of these organizations because they may be able to match you in ways that provide more protection and may be able to provide ongoing support for any questions or issues that come up.

Many chaplains in federal and state correctional facilities welcome inquiries from individuals who desire to write to prisoners. Chaplains often have a list of prisoners’ names who have indicated an interest in having a pen pal. To contact the chaplain at a correctional facility in a particular state, you may visit the Department of Corrections’ website for that state to obtain a phone number and/or e-mail address.

Where to Begin?

When you first receive your pen pal’s information, give thanks to the Lord for your new contact and ask for His guidance as you enter the pen-pal relationship.

What should a first letter contain?

Nearly a hundred prisoners and pen-pal volunteers were asked that question. Here are some of their responses:

- **The first letter doesn’t have to be long.**
  Just introduce yourself. Give your name, interests, and line of work. Tell what church you attend and what your hobbies are.

- **Basic facts.**
  Born where, education, career, military, married, the how-and-when of your salvation, and why you volunteered to be a pen pal.

- **What not to ask**
  The letter shouldn’t ask an inmate, “What are you in for?” (reason for incarceration).

- **Build trust in your initial letters.**
  Don’t give people advice unless they ask for it. Letters should be filled with genuine questions about the life of your pen pal. Basic questions must come first: Where are you from? Where were you born? Do you have a family? Each question will open doors to new ones. Share the basics of your own life. People need to trust you. The first few letters must have the intention of building trust and confidence—the “right to be heard.”
The first letter should offer friendship and encouragement. The first letter should let the prisoner know that you are writing to offer friendship and encouragement (so the prisoner doesn’t get his hopes up about something more—like romance or financial help). [Note: Some pen-pal matching organizations have “ground rules” to define the relationship. The organization may encourage you to send this list to the prisoner pen pal.]

A good first letter should address your personality as best you can, and some of your social interests or hobbies. But also it should address why you are writing a prisoner.

A good first letter should be encouraging and uplifting. Include a little information (not too personal) regarding the writer. Tell how you came to Christ. Tell about your activities as a Christian in your church or Bible studies. Be friendly, but not pushy or preachy. A first letter is an introduction. We are always eager to meet new people.

A Sample First Letter
Always use the prisoner’s complete address, including the Department of Corrections (DOC) identification number. Most mail will not be delivered without this number. And because many prisons have multiple units, it is also necessary to note carefully whether there is a unit number in the address, or whether it’s a prison or work camp, etc.

Joseph G. Jones #8829423
Sumpter Correctional Institution
B-4, 6-C, Unit N
Anywhere, IL 55555

Dear Joseph:
I was pleased to receive your name and address and hear that you were interested in having a pen pal. I am looking forward to getting to know you through our correspondence in the months ahead. Since I know virtually nothing about you, I’ll be interested to learn a little more about your family, about any background you wish to give, and about your daily schedule and life where you are now.

My goal in having a pen pal is to establish a friendship in which we both can share a little encouragement and information. Perhaps we can broaden our understanding of each other’s situations.

I am a high school math teacher. My wife and I have three children—one in college and the other two in high school. Although my schedule is very busy with school and church activities, I plan to answer every letter you write, and to write at least every other week as I am able to do so.

The P.O. Box I use as an address is right on my way to work, so I’ll receive your letters very quickly and should be able to respond within a very short time.

That’s enough to get us started. I look forward to hearing from you and to our beginning to share some of the things that are important to us. Feel free to call me Don, as that’s what most of my friends use.

Warmly,

Donald P. Smith
P.O. Box 6814
Hometown, OK 12345

Some Personal Cautions
How much personal information should you share? Only as much as you feel comfortable sharing. Because the purpose of the correspondence is to encourage the prisoner in (or toward) a Christian faith, you will have to judge how much personal information is “sidetracking” from the purpose of the relationship. But remember, the process of building trust and earning the right to be heard makes it necessary to share enough information to build a trust relationship, while also protecting your privacy and safety.

Because it is now so easy to locate an individual’s home address, and phone number on the Internet, you may want to use a pseudonym—particularly for your last name. (Do not use only your first name, with no last name, because when your prisoner pen-pal writes back, the prison may not release mail that does not include a full name on the envelope.)

As a precaution, we recommend that you use a post office box or church address (check with the church staff first) rather than your home address.
Should you explain the Gospel right away? We suggest that you first share how you came to know Christ as Savior and Lord. Telling about your own experience is more low-key and will not come across as “preachy.” Pray for God’s discernment about when and how to share the Gospel message in a more directed way that will give an opportunity for the prisoner to accept the gift of Christ’s forgiveness and salvation (more on this in Chapter 4).

Be sensitive to the prisoner’s level of spiritual knowledge and understanding. Remember that many prisoners have become experts in the language of Christianity, but sometimes the reality of experience is not behind it.

How to Start
Former Prison Fellowship staff member Debbie Fulmer gives excellent advice on how to get started:

Many new pen pals are faced with a question. What do I say to a person I don’t know? Just remember, this person is someone God loves and died for to set free. This is a message that you will have the opportunity to share.

First, pray. Ask God to give you wisdom and the words your pen pal needs to hear. Ask about your pen pal’s spiritual life. If the prisoner professes faith in God, encourage personal Bible reading or, if possible, regular chapel and Bible study attendance. (Some prisoners do not have access to activities outside their cells.)

Next, share your testimony. Telling what Christ means in your life may have a tremendous impact on those who are searching spiritually or who don’t know they can have a relationship with God.

Romans 2:4b states that the love and goodness of God brings repentance. It is our job as followers of Christ to communicate effectively that love and to sow seeds leading to knowledge of Him.

You may be the prisoner’s only contact with the outside world. Families and friends often stop writing and visiting someone who is incarcerated for many years.

You have a unique opportunity to shine in the darkness of their lives just by writing and sharing an encouraging word.

Additional Tips
As you continue to write, keep these tips in mind.

- Offer encouragement. Let your prisoner pen pal know there is such a thing as a new beginning. Jesus forgives everyone of sin.
- Don’t ask why the prisoner is in prison. Remember, you wouldn’t want someone to ask you what your greatest sin is. Once you have developed a relationship of trust, your pen pal may feel comfortable in sharing more about his or her criminal past.
- Acknowledge that your pen pal’s pain is real. Help to validate the prisoner’s feelings by using such phrases as, “I imagine you felt…” or “I can see how you might have felt very lonely, angry, depressed, etc. in that situation.”
- Speak God’s Word, but don’t preach.
- Don’t violate prison rules. Many prisoners have a history of violating rules. They need to see someone follow a standard.
- Never betray your pen pal’s trust. Most prisoners have very few friends to rely on.
- Humor can help heal.
- If you do something hurtful (like failing to write for a while or saying something offensive), be quick to admit you were wrong and ask for forgiveness. It’s a good example to the prisoner of taking responsibility for your actions. It will help build trust. And it’s simply the right thing to do.

Several ways to share the Gospel are demonstrated in the next chapter, but it is always appropriate to speak from your own experience. Detailing how you met a certain situation with Christ’s help, or with reliance on the Word of God, may be just the example your new friend needs.

Pen Pal Resources
Prison Fellowship does not endorse the following organizations or ministries but simply provides this referral as a service to the prison ministry community. We suggest that materials and services be reviewed by each requesting agency or individual prior to use.

Listing from the Prison Ministry Network June 2007:

Christian Pen Pals
P.O. Box 2112
Statesville, NC 28687
www.Christian-Penpals.com

Evangel Prison Ministries
P.O. Box 19229
Louisville, KY 40259
www.evangelprisonministries.org

Inmate Pen Pal Connection
P.O. Box 73
Syracuse, NY 13206-0073
www.inmatepenpalconnection.org

Romans Chapter 8 Ministries
P.O. Box 8771
Endwell, NY 13762-8771
(serving Northeast, South, Midwest)
A Need for Discernment

Many believers feel a sense of urgency to evangelize. It is ultimately important that each individual have an opportunity to make a personal commitment to Christ and receive the free gift of salvation.

In our zeal, however, we can sometimes move a little too fast and turn off the person to whom we’re witnessing. You will have to exercise discernment and skill as you try to assess the spiritual condition of your prisoner pen pal.

As indicated earlier, many prisoners have had religious upbringing, which equips them with Christian language and even scriptural knowledge. Many prisoners are indeed Christians—they have recognized their need for Christ as their Savior—but have not really surrendered to Him as Lord of their lives and/or have not learned what it means to live out their faith in their daily lives. And some prisoners are not believers but deliberately use “God-talk” to accomplish more personal, manipulative goals.

Understanding a prisoner’s needs will help you know how—and how soon—to present the Gospel if there is not clear evidence that your pen pal is already a believer.

Five Common Characteristics of Prisoners

Understanding five characteristics shared by many prisoners may help you in crafting sensitive letters:

• LONELY
To a prisoner isolated from family, friends, and the outside world, time drags. Try to write regularly and give a prompt reply to every letter you receive. One volunteer says, “Tell them loneliness is God saying, ‘Find Me.’ ”

• USELESS
Being incarcerated devastates a person’s self-esteem. Highlight your friend’s talents and good qualities. Don’t dwell on past crimes or “preach.” Assuming the role of an encouraging friend builds a foundation of trust that may prompt your pen pal to “open up” at a later time. Remember, a little praise goes a long way toward restoring a sense of self-worth.

• BITTER
Prisoners may harbor bitterness toward those in authority, toward those who testified against them, toward family who did not “bail them out,” or toward society in general. Encourage proper attitudes by helping your prisoner pen pal see authority as good and necessary. Yes,
there are injustices in the prison system. Many rules and procedures seem to make no sense. You can help by reminding your pen pal of the importance of forgiveness and patience. Remember, God can use even unjust punishment for His glory.

**AIMLESS**
Life in prison is dramatically different from life on the outside. Prisoners have difficulty adjusting to the present or planning realistically for the future. Questions about interests, talents, work experience, and education may inspire them to set constructive goals for their lives.

**SUSPICIOUS**
Many prisoners have never had positive relationships. Because they’ve grown up believing “nothing comes free,” they may suspect your motives in befriending them. You should persevere in caring about them, respecting them, and in being open about yourself. In time, your sincerity and its source—God’s love—will shine through.

**Bonnie and Allen: A Gentle Witness**
Ultimately, we would like to see every person come to a personal knowledge of Christ as Savior. The pen-pal relationship is a wonderful way to introduce a nonbeliever to Christ and His Word. However, because it is so difficult for many prisoners to grasp the concept of unconditional love and the free offer of salvation, they often treat witness-sharing information with suspicion and caution.

One pen-pal volunteer, Bonnie, gave Prison Fellowship a complete notebook of her three-year correspondence with Allen, a prisoner from Iowa. With his permission, she included copies of all of Allen’s letters to her, of well as copies of her letters to him.

Through the correspondence, Bonnie continually nudged Allen a little bit closer to committing his life to Christ by asking strategic questions about his future, by getting him to read and respond to certain Scripture passages, and by encouraging him to participate in Christian programming whenever possible.

Allen eventually gave his heart to Christ and became a committed Christian. When asked if her correspondence provided a good model, Bonnie said,

“It’s probably ideal as a model, but it is probably not the norm.”

She added that

"the key was just the Lord’s timing for Allen and Allen’s openness to Him. Whether or not any redemptive work takes place [in a relationship like this] is up to the Holy Spirit and how open the prisoner is to change."

It often is very difficult for a prisoner to make this kind of commitment.

Bonnie says,

"It’s as if they are killing a very big part of who they are. They are killing the past and leaving that behind. It’s hard because the past is what is comfortable to them. So it’s really difficult for them to stay strong when they are being ridiculed and harassed by people around them”—as often happens when a prisoner experiences a “religious conversion.”

Bonnie tried to fortify Allen’s genuine faith by sending tapes and other books to the prison library. She wanted him to have other resources in addition to her letters.

She says,

"It’s so important to have that Christian fellowship to grow in. That’s why I was so glad he had a chaplain friend and several believing inmates to encourage him."

**Help for Evangelism**
Remember that the Christian’s responsibility is to sow the seed. God will bring forth the harvest in His own good timing.

Here are some ideas for “other influences” you might mention to help a prisoner hear the Gospel message and respond.

**• Pamphlets and tracts**
You can find pamphlets, tracts and resources to help equip you to share your faith at the following websites:

*American Tract Society*
www.atstracts.org

*EvanTell*
www.evantell.org

*Evangelism Explosion*
www.eeinternational.org

*RBC Ministries*
www.rbc.org

*The Navigators*
www.navigators.org

*The Pocket Testament League*
www.pocketpower.org
• Books, tapes, and resources
  Often a prisoner is not permitted to receive these resources from an individual. (Check with the chaplain or prison administration.) But books sometimes can be sent inside if they come directly from a publisher or a distributor. If you choose to send a book directly from a publisher, be sure that the name and address that you use in your correspondence is the one that would appear on any papers the inmate would receive.

  The rules vary widely and are always subject to local interpretation. Some prisons will allow only paperbacks—no hardback or leather-bound books. Some will allow no cassette tapes. Others will allow tapes if the plastic cases are transparent (not translucent) and if they contain no metal screws (plastic bonded only). Be sure to check with the prison about any restrictions before sending anything to your pen pal.

  You might also check to see if a Christian radio station can be heard at the prison. Prisoners who are denied cassette players are sometimes permitted radios.

• Prison ministry programs.
  There may already be Christian programming in the prison where your pen pal is located. Several national and local ministries take Christian studies, seminars, and evangelistic yard events into prisons.

  Check the following websites for specifics and contact information:

  **Prison Fellowship**
  [www.prisonfellowship.org](http://www.prisonfellowship.org)

  **Billy Graham Evangelistic Association**
  [www.billygraham.org](http://www.billygraham.org)

  **Kairos Prison Ministry International**
  [www.kairosprisonministry.org](http://www.kairosprisonministry.org)

  **Good News Jail & Prison Ministry**
  [www.goodnewsjail.org](http://www.goodnewsjail.org)

  Ultimately, a person must be loved to Christ—not pushed or shoved. If your pen pal is from another religious group—say, Jewish, Muslim, or some other non-Christian group—you may need to go slowly in presenting the Gospel, recognizing the need to preserve the individual’s dignity.

  A life lived for Christ is probably the best testimony to God’s love and power. As you face daily situations, as you work your way through crises, as you learn from sermons and Bible studies and personal devotions, share those lessons with a prayer that God will use them in the life of your pen pal.

  Friendship—without-ulterior-motives is difficult. We truly want to be friends and encouragers. But we also are compelled to share what we know to be eternal truth. Yet God is the One who draws people to Himself. We must be faithful, and trust Him for the rest.
How do you help a person grow in his or her faith, using only the U.S. Postal Service? 

Steadily and creatively, that’s how. 

Having been introduced to Jesus Christ, your prisoner pen pal now needs encouragement to begin and develop a personal relationship with Christ.

Your first goal should be to encourage your pen pal in whatever personal growth activities you can. Daily reading of the Bible is the cornerstone.

If your prisoner pen pal does not have a Bible, he or she should be able to obtain one from a chaplain. If not, prisoners may request a Free on the Inside Bible in English or Spanish from:

The International Bible Society
P.O. Box 35700
Colorado Springs, CO
80935-3570

Prayer life is the second key. Encouraging your pen pal to keep a prayer diary, listing prayers requests and answers, is helpful.

Sending your own written summaries of sermons you have heard, or Bible studies you have experienced, can be meaningful. Be sure to include the “application” as well as the theological content.

Distance-learning opportunities are becoming available in more prisons. These may include correspondence courses, or courses on video or audio tape, or occasionally classes taught by an in-prison instructor. By participating in these opportunities, prisoners can strengthen and deepen their understanding of God’s Word and the Christian life.

Starting at the GED level, and continuing on through Bible certification courses, and on to college-level courses, a variety of options may be open to prisoners.

One excellent institution offering three tiers of educational experience is Crossroad Bible Institute of Grand Rapids, Michigan. You may find information about CBI at:

Crossroad Bible Institute
P.O. Box 900
Grand Rapids, MI
49509-0900
www.crossroadbible.org

Encouraging Community
God has created us to experience spiritual growth within community—the body of Christ.

Scripture says, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another ...” (Hebrews 10:25).

Having other Christians around us as we learn to follow Christ provides a source of accountability, fellowship, and support.

For this reason, you will want
to encourage your pen pal to get involved in Bible studies and other Christian programming that will help build a sense of community with other Christian inmates—as well as volunteers from the outside. The same Christian organizations listed in Chapter 4 provide discipleship programs in prisons as well as evangelistic ones. Encourage your pen pal to find out what’s available in his or her prison.

Most prisons also have chaplains and chapel services. Many chaplains are wonderful, faithful Christians who are committed to nurturing spiritual growth among the prisoners in their institutions. However, because of budget cuts and the need for chaplains to accommodate prisoners of all different faiths, many have been forced into the role of administrator over pastor. Many rely on outside churches and faith groups to lead worship services, so there may not be as much consistency in quality as there would be if one pastor were shepherding the group week to week.

Be aware, also, that many chapels have become places where surreptitious same-sex trysts or drug deals occur—as some prisoners use “church” as an excuse to get out of their cells and hook up with others for their own purposes. Therefore, prisoners who genuinely want to grow in their Christian faith may not want to be in that environment. So if your pen pal indicates a lack of interest in chapel, don’t push him or her go. Find out more about the reasons for the prisoner’s reluctance.

### Studying Together

One way to encourage growth in your pen pal is to do a Bible study together. In one letter, you might send some pages from a Bible study booklet with questions the prisoner can work on. In the meantime, you are working on the same Bible study lesson. Then, in later letters, each of you can share with the other what you have learned and how you have tried to apply what you are learning. This will help you hold each other accountable to being in God’s Word, and you can gain some meaningful insights from each other!

Also, encourage your pen pal to ask you any questions he or she has about the Christian faith or about what he or she is studying. You may not have all the answers—it’s perfectly O.K. to say “I don’t know, but let me see if I can find out more about it.” You may want to ask your pastor to help you with some answers.

### Learning and Literacy Levels Vary

Much has been made about the low literacy level in prisons. By some estimates, between one-third and one-half of the people in U.S. prisons are “functionally illiterate”—that is, they cannot satisfactorily fill out a job application or do basic paperwork.

In addition, research continues to show that a significantly disproportionate number of prisoners have learning disabilities, compared with the general U.S. population. So the incidences of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), visual-perceptual problems, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, and other learning disabilities further complicate the educational picture.

In addition, for many prisoners in the U.S. prison system, English is a second language. Though many understand some spoken English, the written language is harder for them.

Yet Prison Fellowship has discovered that even some of the least-prepared and most-disadvantaged prisoners can do significantly meaty Bible and theological studies, if they have the time and the motivation. It is not uncommon to see a line of prisoners heading for a midweek Bible study carrying their Bibles, a Bible dictionary, a concordance, or even a Greek interlinear New Testament!
Preventive Care

The first way to avoid problems is to stick to the following “do’s and don’ts” of writing to a prisoner pen pal:

DO

• Remember that the main purpose of a pen pal ministry is Christian friendship.
• Use a post office box or your church address.
• Encourage and pray for your prisoner friend regularly.
• Write at least twice a month, if possible.
• Be a good listener and give hope through God’s Word.
• Be aware that prisoners may have emotional ups and downs. You may be able to provide some emotional stability.
• Be aware of con games.
• Be prepared for the possibility of unwanted romantic overtures.
• Check prison regulations before sending any gifts, books, magazines, or tapes (only for Christmas, birthdays, or special occasions).

DON’T

• Give legal advice or counsel regarding a prisoner’s case.
• Send money for financial support or legal fees; don’t co-sign loans or process money orders.
• Ask why a prisoner is incarcerated.
• Provide other names and addresses for your prisoner pen pal to write to.
• Give out your telephone number or agree to receive collect calls.
• Send photos, except for group shots.
• Tell the prisoner about your personal problems.

What Kinds of Problems?

Occasionally the news media feature shocking and dramatic stories of pen-pal relationships gone bad. In most incidents there were obvious violations of the kind of safeguards listed above. There is some element of risk in getting into a correspondence relationship with convicted lawbreakers. When problems occur, they are usually in one of four areas:

- financial scams
- romantic attachments
- ulterior motives, such as a desire to obtain legal help; to aid undercover illegal activity; or to press for leniency, pardon, or post-conviction help
- support upon release from prison.

Financial Scams

It will come as no surprise that there are dishonest people in prison. What starts out as a seemingly wholesome correspondence relationship can quickly turn into requests for financial aid for education, pleas for essential toiletries and clothing that are not being provided by the prison system, or other requests for financial aid.

Everett I. Perrin, Jr., superintendent of a Florida State Prison, wrote and distributed an article entitled “The
Games Inmates Play,” in which he warned well-meaning Christians not to be victimized by manipulative inmates.

In one scam Perrin describes, “the inmate pays to have his name and address placed in publications asking for friends to correspond with ... the inmate starts seemingly innocent correspondence and then requests stamps or money. The inmate will use these stamps to write letters to more caring people. In some cases, he may send 50-60 letters a day and never buy a stamp.”

The inmate, Perrin says, implies that he does not have money for personal items such as underwear, and is not provided other basic necessities.

Perrin says, “Some inmates actually ask to be placed on an allowance,” indicating that some prisoners may be receiving donations amounting to hundreds of dollars per month.

In addition, anything of value can become “currency” in the prison system. Stamps, cigarettes, or other items can become a medium for trading, gambling, or wielding power over other prisoners. One volunteer indicated that the two items she is most frequently asked to supply are stamps and money orders. Note that some prison systems provide prisoners with a certain number of stamped envelopes per month, so there may be no need for stamps at all.

How should the volunteer respond? If you were matched through a particular pen-pal organization, you can simply say, “That’s against (the organization’s) recommended guidelines.” It’s also perfectly acceptable to say, “I’m not comfortable with that request and will have to refuse.” Another option is to respond, “Let me check and see if the prison will permit this.” Most do not, and the prisoner may get in trouble for asking.

Of course, with any of these responses, it is possible the prisoner will try to bully or “guilt” the pen pal until his or her demands are met. If the problem persists, notify the chaplain or warden at the facility (or the pen-pal organization that matched you).

**Romantic Overtures**

This is a particularly difficult area. Christian compassion and the love of Christ can be easily misinterpreted, and unsuspecting volunteers are sometimes drawn into situations where they are not comfortable.

Many male prisoners have never had a satisfactory nonromantic relationship with a female. They may not know how to be “just friends” with a woman. Both single and married women need to be aware that a male inmate can easily become infatuated with a woman he has never met. Prisoners are lonely and may have lost contact with their loved ones and friends. Same-sex “come-ons” also occur.

Single women are encouraged to involve their Bible study or groups of friends in a prisoner correspondence relationship, sending letters from the group rather than from one person.

Married women are encouraged to give the names of husbands when first making introductions, and some choose to sign letters as coming from the family, rather than from an individual.

If a prisoner requests a photo, it may be best to send a photo of the entire family, or a Sunday school class, or a Bible study group (get permission first!), with the pen-pal volunteer included. Many prisoners seek family ties, and the love of Christ shared through letters sent from a family context can open hearts to the Gospel.

Sometimes skillful prisoners will prey on lonely women who are widowed or divorced, or who have been going through difficult situations such as depression or major illness. Unsuspecting elderly women sometimes get drawn into awkward positions by younger prisoners.

If a prisoner indicates a romantic interest, kindly but firmly reaffirm that the purpose of pen-pal correspondence is friendship and that you are not interested in anything else. If the prisoner persists with romantic overtures, state that you will have to stop writing if a friendship cannot be maintained.

When an improper or difficult situation occurs, you may also want to seek counsel from the prison chaplain, your pastor or spiritual leader, or the organization that matched you with the prisoner pen pal.

**Manipulation**

Sometimes prisoners enter a pen-pal relationship with the ulterior motive of gaining help to seek a pardon or early parole, or of manipulating the volunteer in some other way.

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Volunteers should never become involved in legal questions or counsel prisoners concerning their cases. This includes writing letters to parole boards or attorneys. State from the beginning that this is a Christian friendship, and all other matters must be taken to a lawyer or case worker.

Certain resources for prisoners are available through Prison Fellowship’s correspondence department. You may suggest that your pen pal write to Prison Fellowship for possible referral information. (However, make clear that even Prison Fellowship will not be able to offer personal legal advice on specific cases.)

Volunteers may be concerned that prisoners, especially upon release, may come to the volunteer’s location to make personal contact. For this reason we discourage using home addresses and giving out telephone numbers.

It is true, however, that modern technology such as the Internet makes it possible to find nearly anyone in the U.S.

For those who are especially concerned about this security issue, the added step of having an unlisted telephone number may be wise. In general, phone numbers publicly listed are relatively easy to find on the Internet. Unlisted numbers and their addresses generally don’t show up in Internet databases.

And as mentioned earlier in Chapter 3, you may decide to use a pseudonym in place of your actual last name so that personal information cannot be found.
A Primer on Prison

There are many surprises in store for the pen-pal volunteer who has no knowledge of how the prison system works.

In the U.S. there are approximately 1,300 state prisons and 100 federal facilities. In addition, there are county jails, military brigs, and youth detention facilities. These institutions vary in their security level, ranging from super-maximum security down to “honor farms” or work camps.

There is a growing industry of private prisons. These are built, owned, and operated by private companies, with government units simply paying a per diem for each prisoner or renting space in the facilities.

There are also thousands of county jails that house prisoners, generally for lengths of not more than a year. Some of them are huge. Jails in New York City, Los Angeles, Texas, and Chicago house many thousands of prisoners. In addition, some state prisons are now so overcrowded that county jail cells are leased for the housing of state prisoners.

Security First

The number-one concern of prison administrations is security. All control is in the hands of the prison administration. Certainly, many prison officials seek to offer effective rehabilitation services, through they are often thwarted by limited budgets and severely overcrowded conditions. Nevertheless, their primary task is to keep order and to make sure that all prisoners are secure and controlled.

Further, prisoner-labor is often used for such functions as servicing the mailroom and chapel, and in some cases this may mean that the level of service and caring is not high.

In addition, the chaplain’s office does not always provide service that matches the expectations of a volunteer. In some states, chaplain’s offices have been abolished altogether, usually for budgetary reasons. In other cases, one chaplain may serve many institutions. Some chaplains are volunteers, and so the quality of response and caring may vary from institution to the next.

The pen-pal volunteer should be prepared for some of the following:

- Prisoners may be moved quickly, without warning. Mail often is not forwarded.

- Prisoners may “disappear” for some time. This usually means they are in administrative segregation (solitary confinement) or perhaps have been moved either to protective custody or to a medical or psychiatric facility. Long silences may not necessarily mean lack of interest on the prisoner’s part.

- Very few prison mailrooms will permit magazines, books, or tapes to be mailed from an individual to a prisoner. Usually they must come directly from a publisher. Sometimes materials can be delivered through a chaplain.
Tracking Down a Prisoner

As mentioned in the list above, sometimes your pen pal may seem to “disappear.” There are many reasons that your pen pal may be unreachable.

A prison facility that has experienced disturbances may be in “extended lockdown” status for weeks or even months at a time. Mail may not move smoothly during those lockdowns, and prisoners may be transferred, which is hard to track.

Prisoners are often moved to another prison for a variety of reasons. Within the prison system, the sudden and seemingly capricious movement of prisoners is called “diesel therapy.” Administrations may have many reasons for moving prisoners, but they include breaking up gangs or power groups; transferring prisoners to a different level of security as they near release; and sending prisoners for medical, psychiatric, or protective custody reasons.

There are usually ways to verify information an inmate gives you or to track down a prisoner who has disappeared, if the situation warrants it.

The prison records department can verify the presence of a prisoner. Many states have an “inmate search” option on their Department of Corrections website so you can find a prisoner who may have been moved. The Federal Bureau of Prisons offers an inmate locator at www.bop.gov/iloc2/LocateInmate.jsp.

Mail Frustrations

When a letter to a prisoner is returned to sender for no apparent reason, the pen-pal volunteer should try at least one more time to resend it. Address and stamp a fresh envelope and give it a second try.

If your prisoner does not know specific mailroom guidelines for his institution, the prison might provide them directly to you. Contact the prison mailroom for a copy.

- To visit a prisoner in person, you generally must be on an “approved visitor” list. Visiting hours are limited and controlled. Do not expect to “drop by” to see your pen pal if you happen to be in that location while on vacation. Start early to get permissions, and expect security to be tight if you are permitted a visit. You will need to remove all metal, carry with you no money or jewelry, and have a photo ID with you (such as a driver’s license). You may be denied any physical contact such as handshaking or hugging. Depending on the facility’s security level, visits may be conducted by phone through Plexiglas barriers. You can find information regarding a specific prison on the state’s Department of Corrections website or the Federal Bureau of Prisons website (www.bop.gov).

- Prisoners will often complain of unfair treatment and abuse by the prison system. Some of this may be warranted and justified. Some of it may be exaggerated or concocted to gain sympathy. Do not get drawn into defending a prisoner or helping him work for change in his institution.

For the pen-pal volunteer, it is generally unwise to get involved in trying to “right the wrongs” a prisoner says he has suffered. If a situation truly sounds unfair, you may wish to contact the facility’s chaplain.

- Hardback and leather-bound books are generally forbidden. Cassette tapes are generally not allowed. In cases where they are, they must be in transparent plastic casings (not translucent) and contain no metal screws.

- At special occasions such as Christmas, prisoners may be permitted to receive one or two pre-approved items. However, written permission must be gained, and a price limit is often set. For example, when one volunteer wanted to send athletic shoes to his pen pal, prison regulations dictated they could not cost more than $35.

- Expect both incoming and outgoing mail to be opened and read. Only mail labeled “legal mail” and sent directly to a prisoner’s attorney is likely to make it through unopened.

- Some prisons do not permit sending unused postage stamps to a prisoner. Others have a limit of five. Your prisoner should know the rules in his or her particular facility for receiving stamps and other items.

- Mail frustrations

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Stages of Incarceration

Prisoners, much like people with a terminal illness, typically go through five emotional stages in their incarceration: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally, acceptance. Often their behavior can be explained by which stage they are in at the time.

Stage 1: DENIAL

Denial begins when a person enters prison. It generally lasts one to three years for those sentenced to more than 10 years. Some short-termers are in denial for the entire sentence.

Those in denial find it hard to believe they’re really in prison. They focus on getting released. They tend to blame their situation on somebody else. Some prisoners gradually work their way out of this stage; others leave it abruptly when faced with a crisis.

Stage 2: ANGER

When a prisoner can no longer deny the situation, he or she often becomes angry with everyone. Some join prison gangs during this stage. Some learn to play a game in which they gain slight control over their lives by pretending to do what guards want.

Stage 3: BARGAINING

Because God did not answer their angry demands, prisoners may resort to asking God nicely for what they want, making promises to Him in return. They attempt to “make deals” with God or other people. They promise they will mend their ways in exchange for the favor(s) they seek.

Stage 4: DEPRESSION

When it becomes clear that neither anger nor bargaining is working, depression often descends.

One prisoner reports, “When it hit me that I was really in prison, and that I was going to be there for a long time, I was pretty depressed. I wanted to sleep all the time. I wanted to escape my pain.”

At this stage prisoners begin to face the consequences of their past actions and the current situation. They grieve the loss of freedom and the pain of separation from loved ones. Incarcerated mothers are devastated when they realize they won’t be with their children for many years. Depressed prisoners typically withdraw from family and friends.

Stage 5: ACCEPTANCE

Ultimately, prisoners accept the fact that they are in prison for the long haul. This makes some prisoners emotionally numb to everything and everyone. Others go through a period of genuine soul-searching in which they begin to accept responsibility for their situation. Many show a sincere desire to change their lives.

Painful problems, such as a family crisis or a move to a new facility, can trigger a return to earlier feelings. Prisoners must then work through the emotional stages of incarceration again so that they don’t remain in denial, anger, or depression.

The pen pal should prayerfully prepare each letter with sensitivity to what stage the prisoner may be in.
No matter where they are, you can encourage prisoners to use time and energy to build themselves up in the Lord and to develop hope and a plan for the future.

A pen pal from Colorado wrote: “At long last Shawn has committed to the Lord. His terrible hate and anger are gone... He really loves reading his Bible and has stopped complaining (that’s all he used to write). I’ve never had anyone before that nearly caused me to pull my hair out. I even dreaded seeing a letter from him in the mailbox. Thanks be to God for His help and strength to help me through.”

This and similar letters are powerful testimonies to the strengthening and stabilizing factor a good pen pal can bring into a troubled prisoner’s life.

**Why Do Prisoners Stop Writing?**

A surprising number of volunteers report that after only a short time, the prisoner with whom they’ve been corresponding no longer answers their letters. Prison Fellowship went directly to prisoners to ask why, and here are some of the answers:

- **Unreasonable expectations.** Many inmates expect a romantic or financial link. When this does not materialize, they discontinue writing.

- **Unresolved bias.** Stereotypes along racial, denominational, economic, gender, and other lines can be challenging to work through. Some people (volunteers included) may not want to expend the effort necessary to transcend these stereotypes.

- **Problems with mail delivery.** A letter never arrives at its destination because of mailroom mistakes, multiple inmates with the same name, postal service delays, or an illegible or incomplete address on the envelope.

- **Court appearance.** When an inmate leaves a facility for court hearings, his or her mail will likely not be held, or it may be forwarded to the wrong facility.

- **Hospitalization.** Similar to court appearance.

- **Unit transfer.** Transfers occur within the same facility or within the prison system.

- **Parole or release.** Because of these potential roadblocks, we recommend sending at least two letters before trying to locate your pen pal in another way. Remember, your faithful correspondence can make a world of difference to a prisoner.

**Further Resources**

There are several ways to better understand how prison systems work. One way is to become an in-prison volunteer yourself, if possible. The first step is to contact your local Prison Fellowship office to obtain information about volunteer opportunities, the volunteer application procedure, and volunteer training.

It may also be helpful to involve yourself with one or more ex-prisoners, or with the families of prisoners or ex-prisoners. The “spouse and family at home” viewpoint can greatly sensitize a pen pal to what a prisoner is experiencing.

Read prison publications. Perhaps your pen pal can send you, or tell you how to subscribe to, a prisoner-produced newspaper within his facility. (Not all prisons have them.)

- **I Was Wrong** by Jim Bakker (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996)
- **70 x 7 And Beyond** by Monty Christensen (Prison Impact Books, 1987)
- **Born Again** by Charles W. Colson (Fleming H. Revell, 1976, 1995)
- **Life Sentence** by Charles W. Colson (Fleming H. Revell, 1979)
- **Committing Journalism** by Dannie M. Martin and Peter Y. Sussman (W. W. Norton & Co., 1993)
- **Helping a Neighbor in Crisis** by Lisa Barnes Lampman, ed. (Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1997)
- **Daddy, Why Are You Going to Jail?** by Stephen P. Lawson (Harold Shaw Publishers, 1992)
- **Makes Me Wanna Holler** by Nathan McCall (Random House, 1994)
- **After the Madness** by Sol Wachtler (Random House, 1997)
**Getting Prepared for the “Outside”**

When a prisoner is within six months of release, he is referred to as a “shortimer.” Most prisoners, especially if they have spent more than a year incarcerated, are scared to death of reentry into society. Sadly, most who were married at the time of incarceration have watched their marriage disintegrate. When one partner goes to prison, an estimated 85 percent of marriages fail.

Research has shown that ex-prisoners who have the best chance of “making it” are those who have a supportive family or church family waiting for them and available to help.

But many prisoners have “worn out their welcome” with family members. They have no support, no one waiting, and very little chance for success on the outside. Nationally, the U.S. recidivism (reincarceration) rate is more than 50 percent—that is, more than half of the people released from prison will go back inside again within three years.

Not all of them return for committing new crimes, although many do. Some go back for “technical violations” of the terms of parole. These may include reporting late to a parole office or missing a report date, not having paperwork in order, not complying with parole restrictions for employment or travel, or a number of other reasons.

But the statistics are grim. Not many people come out and stay out.

Prisoners know that. They see ex-prisoners come back again and again.

If your prisoner pen pal has had a reasonably long sentence (several years or more), he will be given a tentative “out date” some time before release. Often that date can be moved up if the prisoner earns “gain time” or “good time,” which means obeying all the rules and not having any disciplinary infractions.

Prisoners also know, however, that other inmates may be “out to get them” and may try to trap shortimers into getting disciplinary infractions. They are baited into fights. They are set up to look guilty for certain infractions.

So the prisoner nearing release is a combination of (a) hopeful, (b) very frightened, (c) paranoid about doing everything right, and (d) apprehensive about what he or she will face on the outside.

In the final stages of incarceration, prisoners may be moved to lower-security work camps or even be given daytime releases to ease them back into society. Many will be ordered to spend six months or so in a transitional housing facility (halfway house) before returning to their families or neighborhoods. Most prison systems, however, neither provide nor make referrals to these facilities. It is usually up the prisoner to find a facility and gain entrance for him- or herself.

**The Traumas of Transition**

In spite of the excitement of release when the day finally arrives, many prisoners have a hard time adjusting. Their movements have been absolutely controlled for years. They have not driven vehicles. They have not made choices. They have not had to exercise any discipline about when to get up, when to eat, or how to spend money.
Help Is Available

Thankfully, there are several avenues of help, and the pen-pal volunteer can help connect the shortimer with these resources. Eight months to a year before release is not too early to begin. But certainly when release is six months away, transition planning should be in full swing.

A first step is to obtain a valuable book entitled Shortimer, published by Prison Fellowship. You may download a copy at www.prisonfellowship.org (click on “Resources” and then “Prisoners.”) Categories include housing, employment, financial planning, beating addictions, and parting advice. There is a helpful prerelease checklist.

The booklet tells the prisoner how to take advantage of special, available options, such as the Federal Bonding Program and the Work Opportunity Tax Credit Program.

The local Prison Fellowship office may also be able to help connect exiting prisoners with social services and church families in the immediate area of release. Often short-term or transitional housing is available, and local PF staff are likely to know of good halfway houses and Christian rehabilitation centers.

The local Prison Fellowship office may also conduct marriage enrichment seminars or facilitate support groups for ex-prisoners or their families.

You can find a local Prison Fellowship office on the PF website or by calling 1-800-251-7411.

The National Resource Directory provides an extensive list of resources available through Restorative Justice Community. You can target any area of the country and find local listings of organizations and churches that offer various services for transitional prisoners, such as housing, clothing, counseling, parenting resources, employment services, and so on.

You can access this directory at www.prisonfellowship.org. Click on “Resources” and then “Prisoners.” You can also find the directory at www.restorativejusticecommunity.org.

The Church Connection

A caring local church can be one of the best sources of help for an exiting prisoner.

The local Prison Fellowship office may be able to refer to churches known for being supportive of ex-prisoners. The pen-pal volunteer may want to work through his or her own denominational headquarters to locate a sister church in the area where the prisoner will be released. You might make a contact to prepare the way for a receptive welcome.

For those who use the Internet, there are a number of ways of finding help. There are “church locator” websites—such as www.usachurch.com, which helps to find churches of many different denominations.

Will Correspondence Continue?

Will your prisoner pen pal continue to write and stay in touch after release? Not likely—at least not with the intensity of the prison correspondence.

Some prisoners want to break ties with anything, or anyone, connected to their prison time. Others may have good intentions to continue writing, but like all of us, ex-prisoners are quickly consumed with the tasks of keeping daily life together. They must earn a living, find housing, find transportation, and reestablish relationships and a daily schedule. Despite good intentions, many are simply no longer able to devote the time needed for faithful correspondence.

You, on the other hand, can continue to let your pen pal know he or she is loved and cared for by an occasional letter or phone call, or perhaps a holiday or birthday card. Many such relationships continue minimally for many years after the prisoners’ release.

Allen, the ex-prisoner referred to in Chapter 4 who had a pen pal relationship with Bonnie, comments on the importance of Christian support.

He says:

“Every prisoner who gets out that doesn’t have a Christian program to lean on will go back to the same town, the same friends—or so-called friends—and will get into the same old stuff. They need Christian support on the outside.”

“There is no better time for a person to start getting their spiritual life right. I’ve found that the more down and out I am, the more I rely on God. It’s the perfect time in a guy’s life to get his attention. There are too many distractions on the outside.”

You, like Bonnie, may find the joy of introducing a prisoner to a lifelong relationship with Christ. There can be no greater joy in faithful service.
What do prisoners like to read in a pen pal’s letters? What do they dislike?

To answer these questions, we went to the experts—prisoners themselves. Here are their summary comments, gleaned from a questionnaire, and some individual and telephone responses.

Note that they contain conflicting advice. Some prisoners like to hear about your vacation trips—others don’t. It makes them envious. This is not a hard-and-fast list of do’s and don’ts. It’s only a summary of what some prisoners say they like and dislike in pen pal correspondence.

LIKES

- Tell me how you felt about what you saw or why you did what you did. Don’t just tell me what you saw or did.
- Educational background, race, where you live.
- What you find interesting about the Bible.
- End your letter with a Bible verse you think I might want to hear.
- Let us know about the job market out there.
- Your birthday, so I can send a card.
- Tell me about your church activities.
- I like to hear where you came from—what kind of influence your parents were, and perhaps even ancestors further back. What kind of role models did you have? How did you get introduced to Jesus?
- What kind of adversities have you faced, and how did you develop the faith to overcome?

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• Any information about sports events that are happening or have already happened.

• What magazines do you like to read?

• How can you be forgiven? How can you keep the faith?

• We like to hear about good stuff that is happening on the outside that can help or benefit people in here.

• If someone in your family had a baby, tell your pen pal about it and send a picture. Nothing brightens up a day like a picture of a beautiful little baby.

• I like to hear that somebody out there will be in my corner through “thick and thin.”

• Everyone faces problems. Tell me yours, and ask me to pray for them. Ask me about my problems so you can pray for me.

• Positive information. Anything that gives a person strength and hope.

• I want to stay in tune with the heartbeat of society.

• Tell a little about what is going on out in the world. Many of us have not been out in the world for quite some time and we are interested in keeping up with what is going on.

• The day-to-day goings of life. What are your views, dreams, and fears of daily life? Funny insights the writer has to convey. Most of all—honesty.

• Love us unconditionally.

• Help push me in my search for the truth. And maybe even help me with the way I do things.

• Information that will uplift the spirit. Something that would take a person’s mind off of prison life, such as vacations you have gone on or other activities that you do.

• Ask me what my plans are for when I’m released. I seriously haven’t thought about it. But if I was asked, I might.

• Give feedback to letters. I can hardly stand it when I write someone telling them about how I feel or think about something, and when they write back, it’s like I never said it. That isn’t a friend, if you were to ask me.

• Tell us what’s going on out there—price changes, weather, styles, new cars, etc. All we have in here are dreams, and it helps to put a picture in our mind and keeps us up to date for when we do get out.

• Don’t back out on us when the going gets rough. If you don’t get a reply, drop another line and say, “Hey, are you doing all right? I haven’t heard from you in a while and kinda missed you.”

• Healthy contact with outsiders keeps inmates aware that life is bigger than just us and our problems. To that end, an honest sharing of problems and joys by outside friends is helpful.

• Answer my questions, even if the answer is “None of your business!”

• Be positive and assuring. We see negativism and oppression daily. We need motivation and encouragement. Don’t be afraid to say, “I love you.” We don’t hear that often. Offer genuine friendship.

• If you’re planning to conclude the pen-pal relationship, it would be a great kindness (fruit of the Holy Spirit) to write a parting letter. That way communication is complete. The inmate isn’t left wondering if he may have done something to offend. We’ve generally alienated so many people in the past that we can be overly sensitive about personal relationships. We have too much time to think about things.

• We need someone who really knows God and who is not scared to share that information.
DISLIKES
• Don’t ask specific (offensive) questions concerning crime and guilt or innocence.
• Don’t tell me how lonely you are.
• Don’t tell me about past bad relationships.
• “Sorry, I won’t be writing to you any more!”
• Don’t photocopy letters if you write more than one pen pal. It makes me wonder if you really want to write in the first place.
• I don’t want to hear believers complain.
• I had someone send me a letter talking about how they had spent a month in Europe and then two weeks cruising the Caribbean. I didn’t react well to it. I got angry and jealous and wrote a nasty letter. Afterwards, I felt like a jerk and I repented and they forgave me.

• I don’t want to hear about killings or murders. I do not need to hear about your family problems.
• Personal problems and depressing stuff like that!
• Don’t condemn me for criminal acts. Inmates generally want to put their past lives behind them and start anew. I would not dwell too long on the inmate’s criminal past.
• I don’t want to hear criticism of the religion I practice.
• Most of the guys I know don’t want someone putting their problems on us. We have our own! We want to get a letter that will put a smile on our faces.

• We don’t need pen pals who look down on us.
• It’s easy for us to find someone to preach to us. It’s harder to find a friend.
• Negative talk. No sex or filthy words. Talk clean.
• I do not want to hear how the writer could have been in the same position as the inmate, if not for the grace of God.
• I don’t want to hear that God can’t change your life.
• I don’t want to hear that I’m a condemned person. I have been forgiven through Jesus’ blood.
• Most of the guys I know don’t want someone putting their problems on us. We have our own! We want to get a letter that will put a smile on our faces.
• We don’t want to hear how you voted for a new law making it harder on crimes and prison. Everyone in here usually holds a grudge toward the laws that put them in here.
• As a convict, I do not like for a person to pry into my past crimes, no matter how interesting this may seem.
• Negative criticism. I need competent enlightenment; not cruel indifference.