



Creating a Bridge to Freedom

Ask any driver. Merging from one lane to another can be tricky.

That's how it feels for newly-released prisoners trying to reenter society after years behind bars. Merging back into mainstream culture means overcoming huge hurdles. But with the guidance of a Prison Fellowship Bridge Church, easing into the fast line of life becomes more manageable, more hopeful.

Mark Hubbell, PF's Area Director for the U.S. Northwest, has been involved in reentry ministry since 2002. "Discipleship is the centerpiece of Bridge Churches. It's for ex-prisoners who are serious about change, and churches are excited about this ministry," Mark explains.

The road of discipleship begins long before an inmate reaches the gates of freedom. To recruit local Bridge Churches, Mark holds volunteer conferences, sends out newsletters, and engages congregations in the concept of becoming a Bridge Church.

He asks if they are willing to adopt two or three inmates a year, or maybe one. "We like to start slow and see how things progress," he says.

According to Mark, a Bridge Church needs to have these important characteristics:

1. **A heart for broken people.** "Our PF logo includes a bruised reed," Mark explains, "so our ministry's focus is on hurting, bruised people."
2. **A sense of "intentionally."** This attitude is indicated by a willingness to plan in advance so they can help ex-prisoners establish themselves in the community in a Christ-centered way.
3. **Faithfulness.** "We need Bridge Churches to have tenacity and a willingness to stick with people for the long haul," Mark states.

The configuration and level of ministry differs between each Bridge Church. Some parts of the church may focus on connecting with the inmate before release and others may be mentors before and/or after release, while others may focus on ministering to the family through Angel Tree and other outreach.

Overall, these churches become a vital safety-net for those in reentry – a supportive Christian community that provides encouragement, care, and loving accountability to returning prisoners.

"Meeting with inmates 18-24 months before their release takes the uncertainty out of the picture. Churches and inmates have a better idea of what to expect when the prisoner is out, since some type of relationship started on the inside," Mark explains.

Will you join us in giving brothers and sisters in Christ a place to belong, grow, and to launch a new Christ-centered life? Prison Fellowship has the tools and training to help you get started. Contact your local Prison Fellowship staff at 800-251-7411 to learn more about the need for Bridge Churches in your community and to connect with others involved in reentry ministry.