

New volunteers sometimes wonder what to say to prisoners they meet at an in-prison class or program. However, those with years of prison ministry can share some helpful insights.

Donna Varnam, a former employee of Prison Fellowship, has decades of experience ministering to men and women inmates. Plus, she brings an added layer of understanding since her husband was in prison for a few years.

Here are some tips Donna shared:

1. **Team up.** If you are a woman going into a men's prison or a man going into a women's prison, it is best to team up with several other people, rather than working individually. Each volunteer is gifted differently, but together you can be a very effective ministry unit.
2. **Acknowledge human dignity.** View prisoners as men and women who are someone's sons and daughters, or they may have spouses and children. Look beyond what they are now and see what they could be. See their God-given potential.
3. **Be a friend.** Our goal should be to befriend prisoners, show them God has not forgotten them, and point them to a new or deeper relationship with the Lord. Caring for the downtrodden with a heart of mercy and grace is a desperately-needed ministry inside prisons.
4. **Talk about the prisoners' families.** Show concern for their families. If they have children, ask about them. Donna said, "They love to talk about their kids. They also love to hear funny, light-hearted stories about your kids." However, she cautioned not to disclose too much personal family information and don't overdo your stories of happy family memories. Prisoners are painfully aware they are missing out on making memories with their own families.
5. **Be genuine.** Be honest about your own daily struggles. In other words, don't present yourself as the perfect example of a Christian. We're all just fellow believers seeking to know the Lord and follow His truth. "They know when you're a fake and when people are pretending," Donna shared, "So just be real."
6. **Encourage forgiveness.** Weave "God-topics" such as forgiveness into your conversations, and try to help them see life from another's point of view. Consider sharing how you forgave someone and how this can lead to an improved relationship. "Encourage inmates to let go of their burdens, make peace with family members, and to not let another day go by without trying to make amends," Donna said.

Be yourself. Some people may be called to teach or preach, but others are called to be a friend to the outcast. One experienced volunteer put it this way, "You may not teach a class, lead music, or preach a sermon, but you can still have a huge impact on prisoners by striking up a conversation, lending an understanding ear, and demonstrating compassion."