

DISCUSSION + ACTION GUIDE FOR



A NEW DAY¹

The JOURNEY BEGINS

Hajee, Alona, and Jason are just three of more than 600,000 men and women returning to our communities from incarceration each year. As a result of their criminal records, they face significant barriers to housing, employment, and other elements of a productive life.

The reentry process is neither simple nor easy, but we all have a role to play in helping returning citizens reach their full potential.

GATHER YOUR COMMUNITY

We encourage you to gather members of your community for a virtual or in-person screening of **A New Day 1** (available at prisonfellowship.org/aneday1). Whether at your church or in the comfort of your own home, dive into the challenges of reentry alongside your friends, small group, or co-workers. After viewing the film, unpack it together using this discussion and action guide.

Here are a few simple tips for a successful screening:

- Make sure to invite guests in a timely manner and follow up with them the day of the screening so they don't forget.
- If hosting an in-person event, ensure your screening space has enough room for people to spread out and be socially distanced, if required.
- Provide snacks, like popcorn, soda, or candy, to make the screening feel like a night at the movies. You could consider having a potluck style dinner with your group before the screening and invite guests to bring a dish.
- Be mindful of what your guests are bringing to the table from their personal lives. Are they formerly incarcerated themselves, or do they have a family member who is in prison? If appropriate, consider providing an opportunity for them to share with the group about their own experience with reentry.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Select all or a few questions below to discuss with your group as time permits.

#1 Pillars of Support

Often, people leave prison without very much support or stability—sometimes just with a bus ticket and a little bit of cash. Hajee, Alona, and Jason each experienced an atypical level of support, starting with the Prison Fellowship Academy[®], and postrelease from halfway houses, churches, family, and community.

- **How did this level of support impact them?**
- **Even with their level of support being a best-case scenario, they still experienced trying circumstances—what do you think that says about the complexity of reentry?**

As Pastor E.J. Wood says in the film, “People with a criminal record are not projects; they are people.” Extending second chances to those who have paid their debt to society is a simple message, but there’s complexity to living out this biblical calling. People returning from prison are people that may have heavy baggage and unique needs.

- **How would you respond if Jason or another returning citizen featured in the documentary joined your church? What resources do you or your church community have that might benefit him and his family?**

#2 Barriers to Reentry

When Hajee, Alona, and Jason returned home after prison, they ran into something called the “second prison.” In essence, the second prison means that a criminal conviction, no matter how far in your past, is never really behind you. It affects how people look at you; whether they are willing to offer you a job or lease you an apartment; whether you are welcomed at church on Sunday morning; whether you can get professional licensing; whether you are able to attain financial aid to continue your education; or many other things necessary to lead a full and productive life. All this impedes people with a criminal record trying to get back on their feet, breaking the cycle of crime and incarceration, supporting their families, or giving back to the community.

- **Have you or someone you know experienced elements of the “second prison”? How did it hold you or them back?**
- **What obstacles did Hajee, Alona, and Jason face when they tried to reintegrate into society after serving their prison sentences? Did the restrictions they faced keep people safe? What surprised you about their stories?**

#3 Impact on Families

Prior to Hajee’s release, his mother shares that she felt like she “did the time with him.” With more than 2.2 million men and women incarcerated in America’s prisons and jails and 1.5 million children with parents behind bars, the impact of incarceration on families is far reaching and significant. In fact, 1 in 2 adults in America has had a family member in jail or prison.

- **How do you think having a loved one behind bars might impact a family?**

#4 Women’s Incarceration

When Alona left prison, she immediately took back her responsibility of being a mother and primary care provider to her three kids. And it took a toll—as she says at the end of the film, “I couldn’t do it all. I didn’t know how.”

- **What do you think are some of the unique struggles women face in reentry?**
- **How can we support parents as they come home from prison and reunite with their children?**

#5 Employment

We know that employment is key to successful reentry, and that lack of employment can lead to a higher likelihood of a person returning to crime—this is known as the rate of recidivism. Studies have shown that men and women

who are employed and earning higher wages after release are less likely to return to prison within their first year out. And further, recent research has indicated that individuals with a criminal record are less likely to quit and can actually generate savings for companies from lower costs related to staff turnover. We saw the film’s storytellers be denied employment in some cases because of their criminal records. But also receive a second chance from other managers and business owners.

- **Do you think there should be automatic bans on people with a criminal record from gaining employment in certain jobs or sectors? Or, should there be individualized review of the person and the job opportunity?**
- **If you were a business owner or manager, what would you say to Jason, Hajee, and Alona if they walked into your workplace in search of a job?**

#6 The Battle Within

We often say that reentry begins on the day a person enters prison. This involves a fundamental change of mindset, addressing the thinking patterns and behaviors that lead to crime. Programs like the Prison Fellowship Academy, which Alona, Hajee, and Jason all graduated from, aim to do just that.

- **How do you think men and women in prison can be best prepared for reentry while still incarcerated?**
- **Have you had any experience with serving people behind bars? If so, please share your experience.**

We also know that there’s no easing into reentry. A person goes from very limited freedom inside the walls to having total freedom and responsibilities at home. And in the midst of all this, their old life may come calling.

- **Even with extensive support—while in prison and post-release—what other challenges did the storytellers in this film face? Would you say they experienced unseen, psychological barriers?**

#7 Language Matters

People with a criminal history are often labeled *felon*, *offender*, *convict*, or *criminal*. But on the other side of every label we give, there is a human being made in the image of God. Men and women who have been involved in the justice system are not the sum of their conviction history. All people have inherent, God-given worth; our language must affirm their personhood. They are *people* with a criminal record, incarcerated *men and women*, *people* who struggle with addiction or troubled pasts.

It's important to note that changing our language in this manner does not detract from the seriousness of crime and the harm it does to our communities. To affirm a person's dignity is to also affirm their agency—particularly in relation to other people who have equal dignity, like victims. Behind the labels of *offender* and *victim* are people whose paths have intersected in a devastating way. When we hold people accountable for crime, we recognize their human agency, which further affirms their dignity.

In 2019, Prison Fellowship surveyed Americans regarding their use of the term “returning citizen” for people coming out of prison. According to the Barna poll results, around 1 in 4 Americans claims to be familiar with the term, which is

widely used in the justice reform community. Among those who identify as practicing Christians, a majority are open to using more positive, person-first language, with only 23% preferring traditional labels like *felon* or *offender*.

- **Do you think it matters what a person with a criminal history is called?**
- **How would you feel if you were labeled according to the worst thing that you have ever done?**
- **What are some practical ways you can change your language to be more affirming of the human dignity of men and women with a criminal history?**

NEXT STEPS: WHAT YOU CAN DO

Now that you have spent time discussing the issues people face during reentry, let's explore some initial steps for engaging further. Below are a few ways you can take action on behalf of those impacted by crime and incarceration.

01 Go to prisonfellowship.org/secondchances to learn more about how you can support second chances for people with a criminal record. There you'll find resources for hosting your own awareness building events, like a Second Chance® Sunday service at your church or a community prayer walk, sharing on social media about second chances, and more.

02 Advocate for justice that restores. Prison Fellowship's Justice Ambassador program equips Christians to build relationships with lawmakers, publish letters to the editor in local newspapers, host small-group discussions on justice issues, and more. Apply at prisonfellowship.org/justiceambassador.

03 Provide practical assistance to help people coming home become independent and successful, such as help finding work-appropriate clothing for a job interview, referrals to potential employers or landlords, and guidance on practical life skills like getting a driver's license or filing taxes. If you own a business, consider giving them an interview.

04 Welcome returning citizens into your small group or church. Welcome them like any other member of your group, offering friendship and encouragement as they adjust to a post-prison life.

05 Get to know the families affected by crime and incarceration. Talk to your church leadership about registering for Prison Fellowship Angel Tree™ at angeltree.org.