

CMCA ANNUAL SUMMIT May 14-16 2026 WHEATON COLLEGE

GOD OUR PROVIDER Phil 4:19: My God will meet all your needs...

cmcainternational.org

Meeting Needs, Sharing Hope, Proclaiming Christ

OPEN ARMS:

A CHURCH TRAINING PROGRAM TO WELCOME RETURNING CITIZENS

Presented by:

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Reach the Forgotten Jail Ministry

The Open Arms Training

Agenda

- Part 1 - Open Arms: A Church Training Program to Welcome Returning Citizens
- Part 2 - Understanding the Life of an Inmate
- Part 3 - Rejoining the “Free World”
- Part 4 - Reentry and the Church
- Part 5 - What Now?

Training Objectives:

1. To know what it means to be a welcoming church to returning citizens leaving jail
2. To break stigmas, enabling growth in awareness of the needs of those leaving jail
3. To obtain, at minimum, a basic knowledge of trauma, addiction, and recovery
4. To understand what RTF does, where RTF’s work ends and the church’s begins
5. To learn practical ways to include returning citizens in the church

Prodigal Son

*“For this son of mine
was dead and has now
returned to life. He
was lost, but now is
found.”*

~ Luke 15:24





Part 1
Open Arms

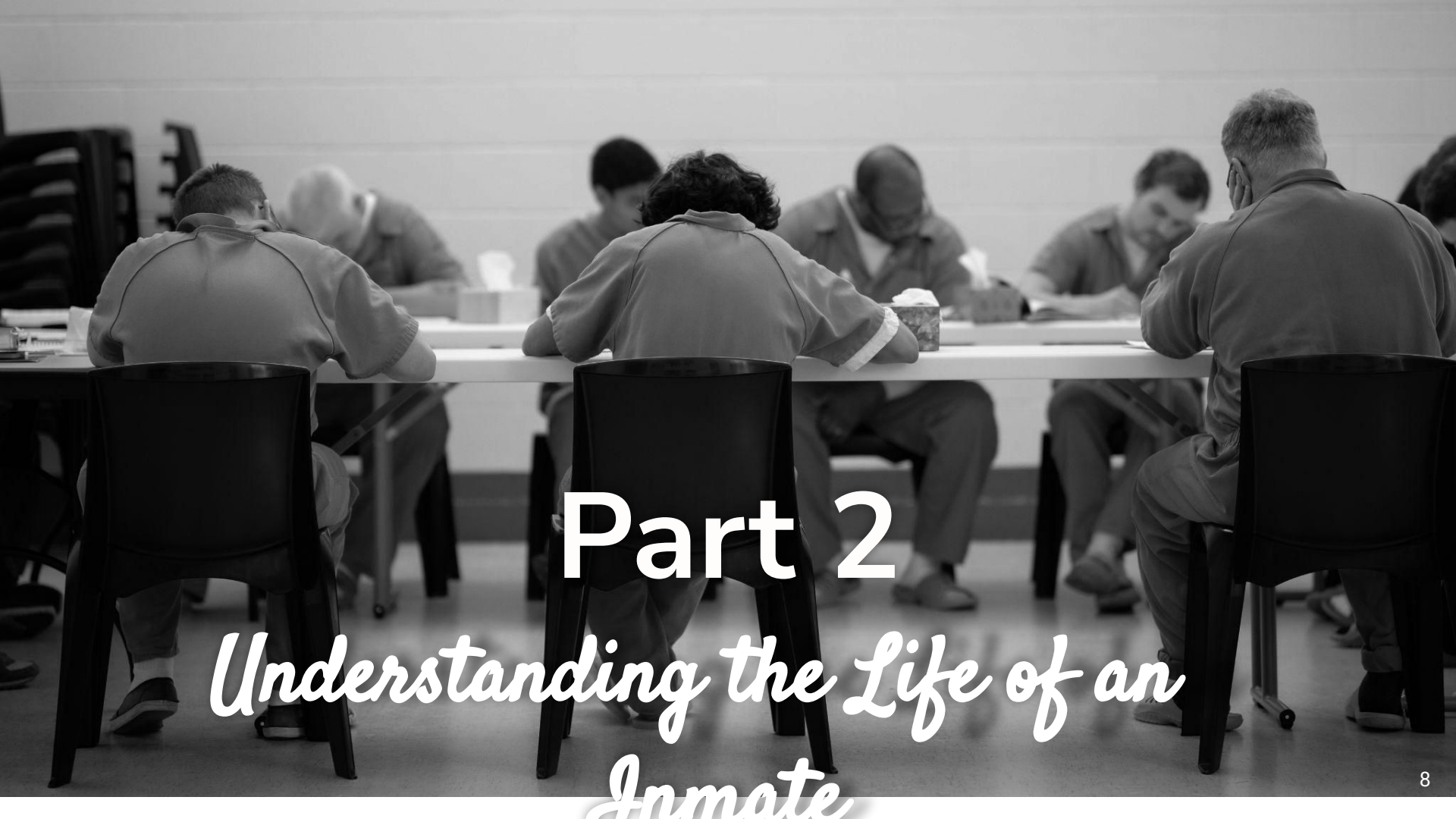
National Statistics by LifeWay

- **94%** of church goers believe that most people with a felony can go on to lead productive lives with help and hard work.
- **69%** of weekly churchgoers believe that local churches have a responsibility to care for the incarcerated in my community.
- **Less than 40%** of church goers have visited someone in jail.
- **23%** of churches minister to people leaving correctional facilities.
- **6%** of churches financially support ministry to the incarcerated.

What is a Welcoming Church?

These partnerships are necessary for success

- The Church
- The Returned Citizen
- Reach the Forgotten Jail Ministry
- Community Agencies



Part 2

Understanding the Life of an Inmate

Case Study:

Intentions Turned Toxic

“I met Jimmy and his family through a local church. He struggled most of his adult life with substance abuse. Eventually, he and his family started to reach stability. Through my connections, I helped Jimmy get a job and transportation. But one day, things went sideways.

Jimmy’s boss called informing me that Jimmy had been absent from work for a week. My colleague and I visited Jimmy’s house to find out what was going on. We learned Jimmy was partying. I was so mad! My colleague had to restrain me from punching Jimmy! Looking back, I do not blame Jimmy for my reaction because the issue was me. Jimmy was just being Jimmy. The problem was that my good intentions were focused on me, my reputation, and my role in Jimmy’s success. My poverty work had turned toxic.”

What thoughts and feelings emerge as you hear this story?

Jail vs. Prison

Jail:	Prison:
90% released to the community	10% go on to prison
Short-term incarceration (under 1 year)	Long-term incarceration (over 1 year)
Operated by local government (Sheriff's Office)	Operated by state and federal government, and private companies
Less accommodations	More accommodations
Many awaiting sentencing and/or trial or serving shorter sentences	All sentenced

Common Struggles of Inmates

- Fear and uncertainty
- Family issues
- Family history
- Mental Health issues
- Addiction
- Trauma
- Lack of Biblical Identity
- Faulty theology
- Employment issues
- Lack of housing or loss of housing
- Material possessions are usually lost
- Charges in multiple counties
- Criminal behavior and thinking patterns

Trauma

Trauma is a wound that leaves a lasting imprint on a person.

Wounds can occur from the events that cause one to be overwhelmed with intense fear, helplessness, or horror.

Trauma is what happens inside of someone as a result of what happens to them.

97% of incarcerated individuals have experienced trauma.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

ACEs are potentially traumatic events that occur in children, ages 0-17. Compared to someone with an ACE score of 0, those with a score of 4+ were:

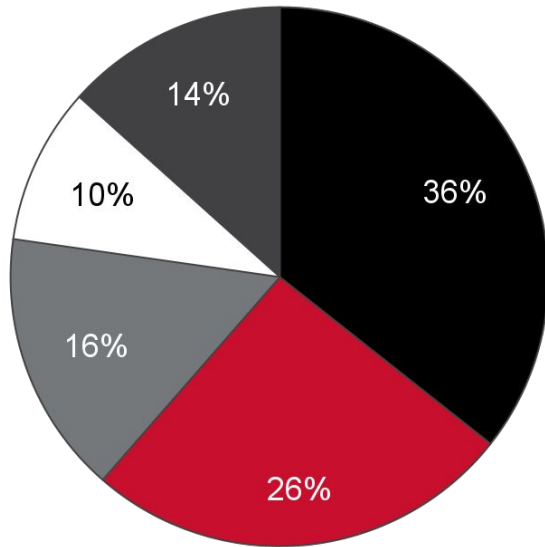
- 4x more likely to suffer from depression
- 11x more likely to become an alcoholic
- 16x more likely to inject street drugs
- 19x more likely to attempt suicide

A teen with an ACE score of ZERO, has a **1 in 500** chance of attempting suicide before their 18th birthday.

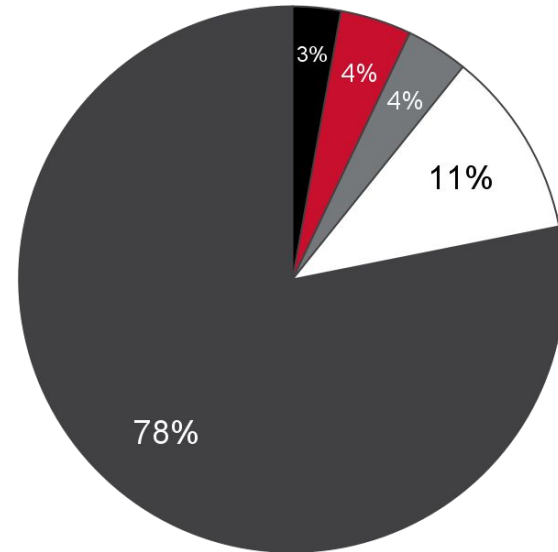
A teen with an ACE score of SEVEN, has a **1 in 7** chance of attempting suicide before their 18th birthday

Comparison of Populations with ACEs

ACE Percentages for the US



ACE Percentages for the Incarcerated



of ACEs Zero One Two Three Four+

ACE Reflections: *Cradle-to-Prison Pipeline*

While most individuals with significant ACEs do not encounter the criminal justice system, exposure to ACEs is a well-documented risk factor for justice involvement, which may be an important indicator of severe and untreated toxic stress.

The neurobiological impact of trauma begins before birth and contributes to what is known as the “cradle-to-prison pipeline.” Children repeatedly exposed to adversity are at increased risk of developing the toxic stress response, which involves disruption of the neurobiological systems responsible for learning, memory, impulse control, attention, and emotional regulation.

**Information regarding ACE's were taken from The CDC-Kaiser Permanente adverse childhood experiences (ACE) study, ACE Overcomers: The Center for Resilience and Understanding the prevalence of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) in a male offender population in Wales: The Prisoner ACE Survey*

Addiction Definitions

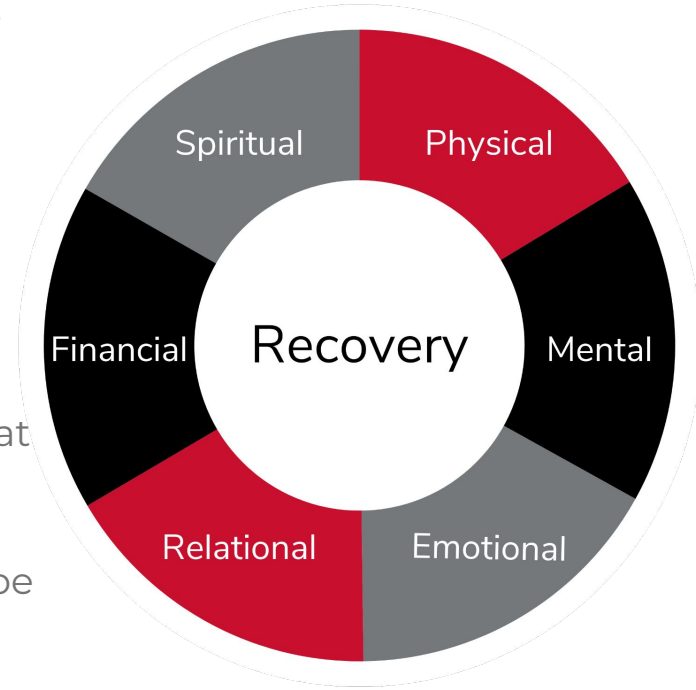
- **Biological** – a treatable, chronic medical disease involving complex interactions among brain circuits, genetics, the environment, and an individual’s life experiences. *(American Society of Addiction Medicine)*
- **Psychological** – a state of psychological and/or physical dependence on the use of drugs or other substances, such as alcohol, or on activities or behaviors. *(American Psychological Association)*
- **Social** – a distinct physical desire to consume a substance beyond one's capacity to control it, in defiance of all rules of common sense. *(examples from AA, Big Book)*
- **Spiritual** – when your life has become unmanageable due to the use of alcohol, drugs or other chemical substances, food, gambling, pornography, sex, relationships, or because of other hurts, hang-ups, or habits. *(examples from Celebrate Recovery)*

Addiction

- What most definitions have in common: **Addiction results in harmful, repetitive behavior that a person can no longer cease or control without external help.**
- This often starts off as a choice one makes, but then your body experiences chemical and neurological changes that can lead to dependency and eventually the disease of addiction.
- It can be chemical and behavioral.
- Addiction changes the way the brain and body function.
- Addiction can be a consequence of unresolved trauma. Trauma heightens stress and then substances and behaviors provide a way to cope.
- Addiction occurs when life has become unmanageable.

Recovery

- An individual abstains from the substance or behavior that has kept them stuck in their addiction cycle.
- Does not come as a one size fits all.
- Recovery is all-encompassing.
- Recovery is both a process and a sustained status.
- Addiction creates chaos. Recovery helps build a life that is manageable.
- Recovery includes relapse. But recovery work cannot be undone.
- Sustained change requires at least 2 years as an individual is connected to support.





Part 3

Rejoining the "Free World"

Case Study:

Trigger Warning

Ben was just released from jail. He was connected with a church that invited him to join them for worship. Most of the congregation was excited about introducing this program for returning citizens and many were trained on what it looks like to welcome returning citizens. Ben showed up and was welcomed with open arms.

Suzie has been a part of the congregation for a few years now and has experienced a lot of healing after leaving an abusive husband who had been in and out of jail. While Suzie has been prepared, knowing that this program would launch in her church, she wasn't prepared for how she would be triggered. Men who had similar traits as her husband started coming to her church after being released from jail, and she felt threatened.

How do you as a church respond?

What does release look like?

- Every day has a set time for people to be released.
- Some releases are spontaneous (paid bond, released at court) and some are planned in advance (court ordered).
- Leave with what (clothing and items) they came in with. Consider weather, season, and changes in weight.
- Who is waiting at the door often determines the path for success or failure.





What are reentry concerns?

- Housing
- Employment
- Church
- Mentor / Sponsor
- Money / Food
- New Friends
- Prescription medications
- Old “Friends” / Dealer / Pimp
- Probation
- Transportation
- Family



Part 4

Reentry and the Church

Redemptive Compassion: *Relationships*

People are not projects to be fixed. People are image-bearers.

Ministry rooted in relationship is imperative:

- It follows Jesus' model
- Good way to get beyond assumptions & bias
- It's hard to hate, judge, dismiss, misunderstand, or avoid when it's up close
- Need is complex... how can we know how to engage if we don't know them?
- Protects us from doing things that make us feel better

“We” (the givers) are changed and transformed when we're in relationship with “them” (the recipient). *Mutual growth and transformation is the goal!*

Redemptive Compassion: *Charity Giving vs. Developmental Compassion*

Charity Giving

This can foster a sense of inequality that further separates those who have from those who don't.

Developmental Compassion

This is not just meeting a physical need, but being physically present in someone's time of need.

"Redemptive Compassion: A Study Guide" by Lois M. Tupy

Redemptive Compassion: *Listening and Collective Discernment*

*Listen to God (discern) and others (counsel) and seek instruction
(Scripture) before taking any course of action.*

EVERYONE must learn to be a better listener! Value, worth and love is communicated to others when we listen.

Decisions about how to help others must be made in community, collectively discerning how God would have us engage and serve.

Boundaries

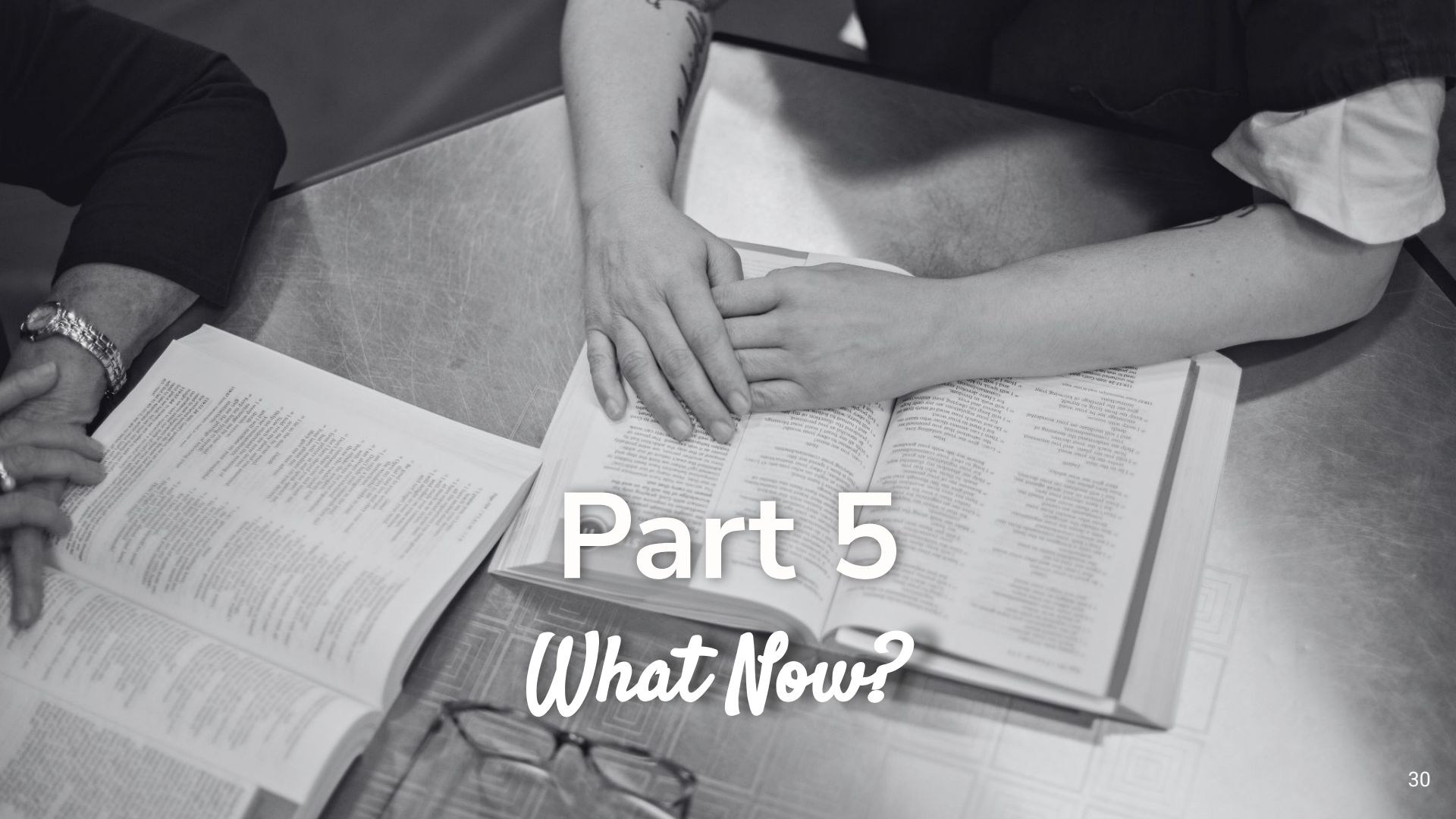
- Don't give money
- It's ok, and often appropriate, to say no
- Don't drive or meet with someone of the opposite gender by yourself
- Pair people with same gender for mentoring
- Practice healthy detachments
- Continue to point the person toward resources, and help them to deepen their community of support
- Don't try to be everything to everyone

Best Practices

- Set expectations together
- Team up with others
- Don't isolate
- Have accountability for yourself
- Don't try to make them a replica of yourself
- Don't take their "success" or "failure" personal. It's not about you
- Verify the day of before just showing up if you're giving a ride or meeting them somewhere
- Consider using Uber drivers for initial rides for church if there are transportation or liability concerns

RTF's Definition of a Welcoming Church

- A welcoming church doesn't discriminate, or put someone in a box.
- It's more than a greeting on a Sunday.
- It wants to understand who you are.
- Can separate sin from identity.
- They find common ground/relatability.
- They are learning how to create a safe space where truth can be shared in love.
- When you fall, people are still there to embrace you.
- They understand that the process is messy.



Part 5

What Now?

True Story - From Exclusion....

The first church I visited after leaving jail, I sat quietly in the back. People stared, whispered, and avoided me. The pastor seemed to aim every comment about sin at me. It was a small church—we left after 30 minutes. I felt judged, unwelcome, and out of place.

At the time, I was living in a domestic violence shelter and made it my mission to walk to every nearby church, searching for acceptance. I knew I didn't "look the part," but I still hoped for kindness. Isn't church supposed to welcome us as we are? If not there, where is Jesus?

I tried five churches. Most made me feel like I didn't belong—like I was breaking invisible rules about how to look, act, or be. In jail, we were told we could "come as we are," but outside, that didn't seem true. I was looking for the same love I saw from jail volunteers, but found mostly suspicion and judgment.

To Inclusion!!!

At one church, an elder even asked why I was there and what my intentions were. That was the last straw—I stopped going. I didn't want pity, just to be seen as a person, not a problem.

After so many painful experiences, I had no plans to return to church. But then the jail chaplain invited me to share my testimony at another church. When I arrived, everything changed. People welcomed me with open arms, saw me for who I was, and showed real love. I wore the same clothes as before, but this time no one stared or whispered—they embraced me, talked to me, and reflected Jesus in their actions. I had found my church home.

If the chaplain hadn't reached out, I don't know if I would've tried again. But God didn't let me slip away. Now I work in this very field—only God could have written that story. For a while, I doubted the love shown by jail volunteers was real. But this experience proved it was. God's love is real—I just needed the right people to show it.

Potential Barriers

- Pastoral Support
- Lay-person leader
- Open Arms “system”
- Lack of support within the church
- Motivation
- Fear
- Presence inside the jail
- Communication
- Church Location
- Transportation
- Dress code
- Style of worship
- Makeup of the church
- Seating
- What if....too many or no one shows?
- Community groups / bible studies
- Sexual identity
- Type of charge
- Probation Requirements
- Commits a new crime

Welcoming Team Members

Greet New Faces

- Approach and introduce yourselves
- Be intentional before and after service
- Engage with their whole family, including kids

Build Connection

- Offer to exchange contact info
- Invite them to lunch or coffee
- Share information about groups beyond Sunday services

Follow-Up

- Check in during the week
- Offer transportation if needed

Provide Ongoing Support

- Be present beyond Sundays
- Listen without judgment and help remove barriers
- Avoid offering quick fixes—focus on genuine investment
- Connect them with others in the church

Be Aware of Their Realities

- Understand many face job limitations and life challenges
- Offer consistent, compassionate care over time
- Share resource connections where appropriate

Offer Places to Plug In

- **Presence based invitations** - Serve in your local jail and invite them to church
- **Sunday Services** - Have a welcoming plan for ex-inmates coming to your church.
- **Weekly Drop In Group** - Host a group where anyone is welcome to attend, anytime
- **Bible Study** - Offer a study that's open year-round and allows people to join anytime
- **Recovery Group** - Group focused on overcoming addiction (AA, NA, CR, LR, etc)
- **Peer Led Ministry** - Someone who has lived experience and is now thriving
- **Mentoring** - Pair people of the same gender for intentional discipleship

General Tips

Listen More, Fix Less: Focus on understanding rather than providing quick solutions. Offer advice only when requested; often, your presence is enough.

Invite Without Pressure: Welcome them to church, but respect their pace. Many have experienced "church hurt" and need time for relationships to lead the way.

Empower Connections: Provide openings to meet leadership, but let them choose the timing and the people they connect with.

Lead with Grace: Be a community of open arms—welcoming and supportive without judgment.

A black and white photograph showing the lower legs and feet of a person walking on a paved surface. The person is wearing dark pants and white sneakers with a textured sole. The camera angle is low, focusing on the feet and the ground.

Wrap Up

Resources

- **Transitional Resources Link**
 - tinyurl.com/RTFtransitiondoc
- **Sex Offender Church Resources**
 - tinyurl.com/SexOffenderResources
- **2-1-1 (United Way)**
 - unitedway.org/
- **Redemptive Compassion Training**
 - redemptivecompassion.org/
 - loveinc.org/ - find your local group
- **Jail Ministry Stories:**
 - jailministry.org/impact/
- **Healing the Wounded Heart Training**
 - jailministry.org/hwh/
- **Poverty, Middle, Wealth - Comparison**
 - tinyurl.com/CompareClasses
- **MiBridges (food stamps, medicaid)**
 - michigan.gov/mibridges/

Reading

- **Redemptive Compassion: A Study Guide**
 - by Lois M. Tupy
- **When Helping Hurts**
 - by Steve Corbett & Brian Fikkert
- **Toxic Charity**
 - by Robert D. Lupton
- **Boundaries**
 - by Henry Cloud & John Townsend
- **Safe People**
 - by Henry Cloud & John Townsend
- **Victory Over the Darkness**
 - by Neil T Anderson
- **Search for Significance**
 - by Robert S. McGee
- **Deep in the Heart of Texas: A Memoir**
 - by Texas A. Steady

Stay Connected:



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