

ONE PARISH ONE PRISONER

LEARNING MODULES

THE LOST ART OF LETTER WRITING

Prison letters are how we start new relationships. They also make up much of the New Testament and ignite social change.



FRIENDSHIP WITH THE BURIED

"This is the land of the forgotten, right here," a man named Ramon once told me through the bullet-proof glass during a supervised visit in a remote prison, bold of us holding black phones to our ears as we spoke.

"This is the realm the dead, bro," he leaned back from the glass and looked around. "We're dead to society. To our family and friends. Any time you wanna talk to us, bro, take the time to talk to me, write to me, take my call, you're resurrecting the dead, homie. I come alive again. Somebody knows I'm still in here."

Letters are the most basic form of human connection, breaking into the modern prison tombs.

We get out paper. We say hello. We say something about ourselves. We realize something even as we write. We ask questions, which invite a response. The letter slides under the door, many miles away, into the prison cell. A friendship opens. The prison walls between us—and deep within us—weaken.

Friendship is the “f” word we dare to use here at Underground.

It’s Jesus’ friendship with Lazarus that leads him to the tombs where his buddy is buried. It’s his friendship that leads him to weep there, standing on the outside. It’s friendship that unlocks the resurrection work ahead.

Prison letters into the tombs, and the friendships we can build, are the sacrament, the portals, into a greater mystery.



A LOST ART

There’s a quality of connection in written correspondence that can be—and often is—much better, much deeper than live conversation. We have lost this gorgeous form of communication, and we are missing out. Especially in an age of texts, tweets, and emails.

Prison letters are just about the only place where the form still exists today.

So you, dear reader, whether you are a parish team member or releasing friend, might be a little anxious.

Or “Scared as hell!” one thirty-something team member told me last year. But she later reported, “I talk about things in my letters with Wally now that I don’t really talk about with anyone else in my life. It’s my favorite part of the week.”

Letters are where we in One Parish One Prisoner discover each other. (We’re gonna call it OPOP for short.)

Written correspondence has been the foundation of our work with our friends in prison and their OPOP team, and a trusted place of quiet joy and honesty. Letters are where initial trust is built, which is essential for the road of reentry ahead.

Individuals in prison, at the start of this OPOP journey, are likely to ask themselves, "Is this just a nice person in the community?", or "Do these people really care about the real me?"

Well? Can you picture yourself actually spending time with these people? Trust? Embrace?

In a recent OPOP Kickoff Orientation, a new congregant asked our longtime friend Alejandro—who wrote to us for years while he was in maximum-security prison—what he thought a "good letter" was.

Alejandro answered,

"A good letter was whenever someone reached out

and really wanted to know what's going on in me.

So, when you write a letter, don't overthink it.

Just speak to them how you would speak to someone you care about.

Like a friend.

Be brutally honest.

Be sincere.

What you've already given them is ten times better

than what the streets have shown them."

OUR GOAL: RELATIONSHIPS OF TRUST

Here are three words to keep in mind through this entire journey ahead. Consistency + curiosity + kinship. We'll come back to them over and over again. They can help point us toward the connection we seek.

CONSISTENCY

Many folks carry a deep wound of abandonment—parishioner and prisoner alike. They've been dropped or forgotten repeatedly. We team members can be part of the healing of this wound or a deepening of it. It can be devastating for anyone to begin a relationship, and then have that relationship terminated because the person on the other end lost interest or got too busy to stay in touch. Imagine this happens while in prison. Imagine this happens while you're writing to someone in prison.

Consistency, then, is even more important than the content of our letters. It communicates to all of us that we are valuable. Not disposable or forgettable.

In short: don't worry about saying the wrong thing (perfectionism); instead, avoid about being flaky. Simply "showing up" regularly, over time, with letters .

So pick a day of the week—every other week. Maybe a specific time of day. Put it on the calendar. (Seriously. Stop and do this now.)

Watch this quick video of a team member reviewing her year's worth of letters with her released friend, Paul—now home and sitting at her kitchen table his first week out. This is consistency.



This video explores the lost art of writing letters and their profound impact, particularly for those struggling and incarcerated. It highlights the letter program at Underground Ministries, showcasing how this initiative significantly benefits both justice-impacted individuals and those writing from outside prison. The program enhances the quality of life, gratitude, and positive thinking for all participants,

illustrating the transformative power of heartfelt correspondence.

CURIOSITY

We're not here to give advice, to coach, correct, or mentor. We listen! Everyone is new here. This is the first learning module! We may learn something that concerns us, or bothers us. The holiest stance is to be curious. To wonder, with compassion: What's the story that has brought this person to this belief, desire, action, or attitude? Do I have assumptions that I get to re-examine?

Curiosity frees us from judgment, and opens the gift of better questions. And much more exciting conversations.

Pro tip: Learn to ask open ended questions to create a more welcoming space of authenticity.

KINSHIP

We belong to each other. We aren't helpers, they aren't projects to be fixed. Beneath incredibly different life experiences, we might find an equality of heart. The joy, the fun, is discovering this.

You just being your authentic self invites others to the same.

“My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.”

— Arch Bishop Desmond Tutu



PRISON LETTERS ARE RADICAL

Much of the New Testament—what Christians have called holy scripture—are letters, epistles. And many of these scriptures are prison letters. Many were written by a formerly violent aggressor (Paul the Apostle) trying to describe something new that was happening inside him, trying to build trusting relationships with new communities—many of whom suffered great violence because of him.

We are participating in this story, now. This same form: prison letters today.

Many OPOP congregations and small groups have begun sharing portions of their releasing friends’ prison letters as a “New Testament Epistle” during the Sunday service. Folks in the community smile, giggle at remembering what epistles are—then they sit up and hear fresh words from a brother or sister in prison, addressed directly to them, their specific community. This is a living tradition.

We are also dipping into an important tradition: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s “Letters and Papers from Prison”; Martin Luther King Jr.’s iconic “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” Not to mention the prophet Jeremiah’s written oracles from the pit and the chained stocks.

The word of the Lord, our tradition repeatedly dares to say, might not just go into prisons, but be coming from prisons. Why would we want to miss out?

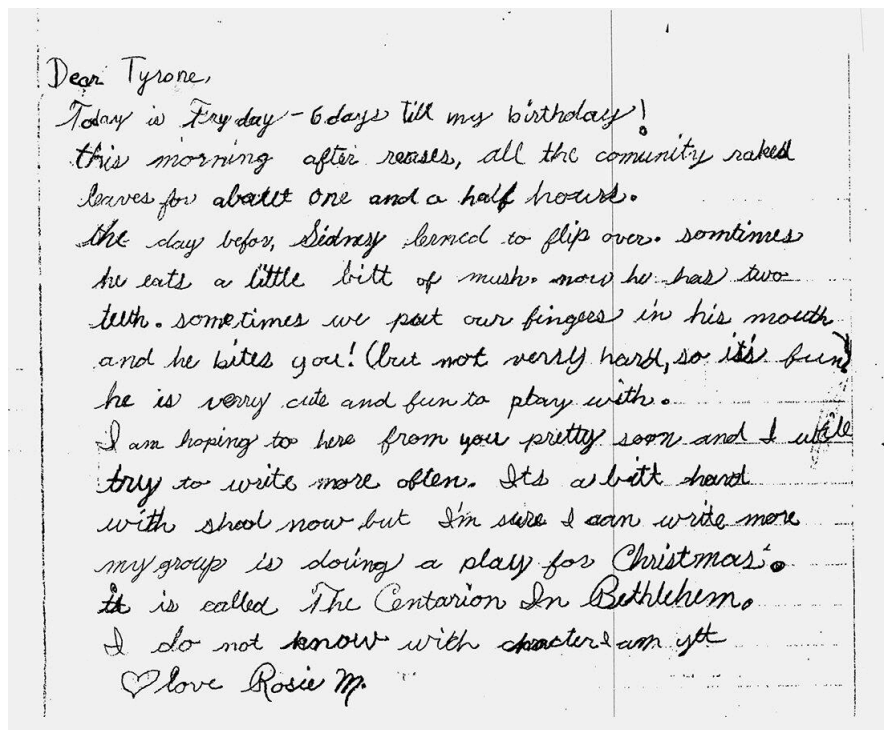
And writing letters into prison is to be in fellowship with those in the “hell” society has built. The underworld, the realm of darkness and torment and punishment, cut off from the land of

the living. With your letters, you are already joining Jesus' divine movement through the gates of Hades. (Matthew 16:18)

Don't be afraid.

Jesus says this a lot.

A STORY



Before we give you some prompts for your letters this month, here's a beautiful story from our friends at the Bruderhof: how a quiet rural family's little daughter started writing a man on death row. That started a relationship that grew into a decade, and embraced the entire family. (Hint: maybe it's ok to involve your kids, if you want.)

Read [Letters from Death Row](#) by Toby Mommsen on Bruderhof.com. (See Attached at end of Module)

PROMPTS TO START



Below are some ideas to prompt the kind of letters worth writing—and reading. Where you hopefully see yourself anew, in this new correspondence. These prompts might spark better ideas. Go for it.

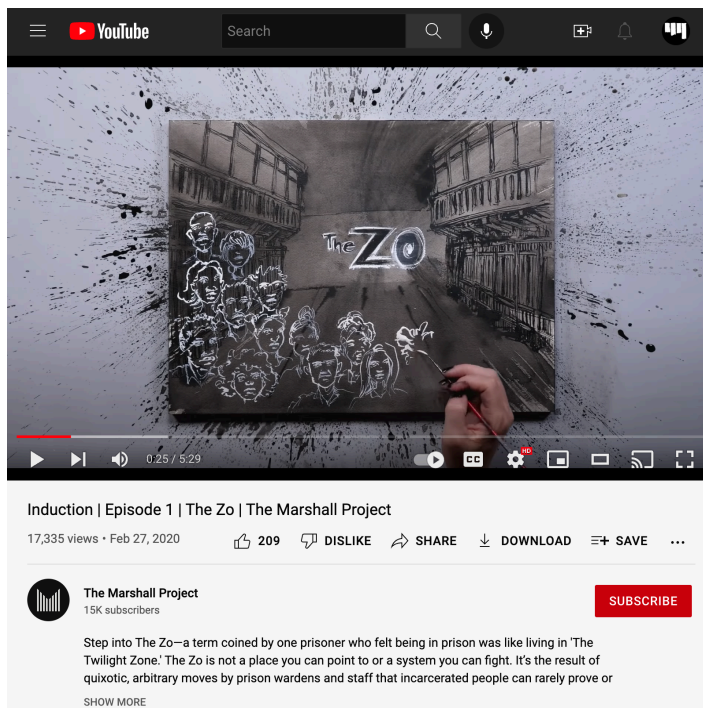
Why Are You Doing This?

Imagine! A stranger saying they want to be your friend and help you out of a difficult situation? Would your first reaction be total openness? Or might you have some skepticism? When we start writing letters to one another, it is essential that we be as honest as we can. Why did you say yes to this One Parish One Prisoner experience? What motivates you? What fears or hesitations do you have? Honesty invites honesty. You answered this in the application, the registration, the team Kickoff, the time you spent waiting for an answer from Underground. What an easy way to dive into your first letters.

A Day in the Life

One way to introduce ourselves and discover each other is to simply describe a day in your life this last week. Both the basic routines, as well as something that made your week. Or a setback. Ask your new friend for the same. Our worlds are different in many ways at this point. Let's learn.

Here's a brilliant 5 minute depiction of "a day in the life" on the inside.



To view this video visit:

youtube.com/watch?v=EE33jJirvk8

"Step into The Zo" explores the disorienting experience of prison, likened by one inmate to living in "The Twilight Zone." The Zo represents the arbitrary and quixotic actions of prison wardens and staff, creating an environment where incarcerated individuals struggle to defend themselves or prove their reality. The first episode, "Induction," reveals how prison guards and administrators employ deliberate bureaucratic paradoxes to undermine inmates' sense of reality and self.

A Turning Point

Those leaving the underground are very aware of the need or pressure to “change” their lives. Was there a point in your story when you faced yourself in the mirror and knew something had to change? Maybe you weren’t on hard drugs or in prison, but do you have a turning point (not just when you came to faith)? What struggles did you face? How many tries did it take?

Freedom to Talk About Hard Stuff

Often people writing to those locked up share something heavy—something that they’ve never shared with family or friends in church. This is powerful. A chance to share past or present struggles outside the “nice” bounds of church, not be judged and avoided, and model to them our own imperfect humanity. See what happens.

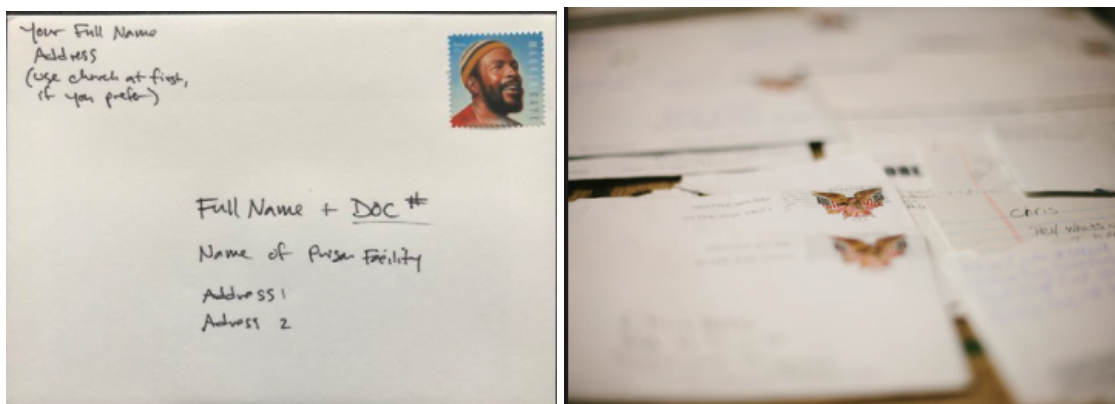
“You are only as sick as the secrets you keep.”
— Twelve Steps / AA saying

TECHNICAL STUFF

This is for parish team members to know and incarcerated folks to correct or affirm. Let’s all be on the same page!

Make sure you address your envelopes with your full name and their DOC number on the front.

Like this:



Simple envelopes and paper only—typed or handwritten. Adhesive, glitter, fancy cards are often rejected. NO extra design or flourish on the envelope, please; they hate that.

Get your first letter sent out!

ENVELOPES

Folks in prison get x number of pre-stamped USPS envelopes every so often. We hear different times from different folks in different facilities at different times. It's pretty common for us at Underground, at the start of the team's journey, to hear from releasing folks that they got a bunch of letters, but need to wait until the next month's batch of envelopes to reply.

Let's fill their POSTAGE account right away! That happens via JPay: www.jpayers.com

The first parish team member to read this, contact the rest of the team that you're creating a JPay account and get \$10 in there for POSTAGE.

Please do not add money to any other accounts—only postage. Even if they ask. Remember: the focus is on relationship, not resources.

PHOTOS

We strongly encourage you to send photos as often as you can. Photos from the outside are gold for our friends inside prison. But yes, prison have rules around sending photos:

- No more than four in each envelope.
- Keep an eye out for content that might hardly be an issue on the inside—anything remotely provocative or distracting or might almost resemble a general floor plan of the prison facility will be rejected.
- Write your friend's LAST NAME and DOC NUMBER on the back of each photo you stick into the envelope... and on every letter.

EMAIL IN PRISON

Yep, you can email with someone in prison now. We don't encourage this until after a month or two of paper letter writing. And! Keep sending letters after you get on the email train.

It used to be via JPay. The mass migration across WA DOC facilities from JPay to SECURUS is now complete. We still call it JPay. It'll always be JPay in our hearts! "I got a JPay from Theresa the other day."

<https://securustech.online/#/login>

Click and follow the prompts to get set up. Have your friend's DOC number handy.

If they're in a WA State prison, they fall under the WA Department of Corrections.

If they're somewhere else, Google how to share electronic mail with them.

Prison email platforms vary a little bit. Often folks outside have the option to send stamps (for email), funds, etc.

SECURUS lets you do a bunch of things. Take a look and poke around. That's for later!

PHONE CALLS

When you feel ready to talk on the phone, you can set up a SECURUS phone account, and add funds to your phone number's account (not an inmate debit account), paying only for their calls to your phone.

BOOKS

This is an optional sidequest. One Parish One Prisoner monthly learning modules are online and mailed in to releasing folks by the parish team. Occasionally, teams will decide on a short book club or identify a needed book (for school, training, etc.). Once, a team sent in a book on powwow culture for celebrations on the inside.

Here's the deal.

Sorry. We can't mail our own books into a facility—not even new ones we buy from a brick and mortar store. We can only send brand new books purchased online, from the online vendor (like Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and Powell's Books) sent directly to their prison address, DOC number and all.

Please note, online vendors handle used books. Make sure you're sending a new book from a business.

MONEY

A key component of our program is avoiding, as much as we can, the entanglements of Giver/Asker dynamics that come with money and resources. Why? So that we can create a space for strings-free relationships. For that reason, we do not send money on inmates' accounts, food packages, phone accounts, or to girlfriends or boyfriends in need outside prison. None of that. We don't do it.

(Also, we don't relay messages or handle social media accounts on behalf of folks inside. Please understand this clearly. Team members do not make contact with family members or friends on behalf of releasing friends. NO CONTACT orders exist.

If an introduction could be helpful, releasing friends please reach out to your contacts and provide their information to your team members.)

Hey team, please don't ask for or offer money. That's not what we're here for at this point in the journey because it can alter/damage the relationship. We are aware of how hard it is to not have the things we need, or want, while incarcerated. This might not make sense to y'all now but trust the process. From the words of our formerly incarcerated staff, you will be grateful later that you didn't ask your new friends for money now.

Everyone on the team is reading this, right? This is policy.

The One Parish One Prisoner program, at this point, has us only using money for postage and on phone accounts to take your calls. In the future, we will be fundraising to take care of a lot of the obstacles facing your reentry. That's how the program is guiding us. Right now, it's just about enjoying building a relationship with you, free of money concerns. That way it's always about relationships, not resources. There's a full module about that ahead, too.

Incarcerated friend, please don't ask for money. This program does not permit that, and it can damage the relationship building process at this point. The OPOP application is clear about our unique emphasis of relationships, not resources.

We are aware of how hard it is to not have the things we need or want while incarcerated. This might not make sense to you now but trust the process you will be grateful later that you didn't ask your new friends for money. Focus on educating your team on how Securus, envelopes, pictures, and books work on the inside. You're the expert.

Overwhelmed? Good! We wanted to give you everything you need here.

We will share more about the ways your community can (and should) be preparing to use financial resources most effectively in the reentry road ahead. There is a much larger discussion of this coming soon.

But for now just sending off your first letter—this is often the hardest bump for people to get over. If you can do that, you've begun.

ACTION STEPS THIS MONTH

- WRITE YOUR NEW FRIEND(S)
- SEND A PHOTO OF YOURSELF! Tell why you chose this photo. Maybe a family photo, or with your dog, or at your favorite lake. This is a window you're opening to your life.
- DISPLAY! Put your new friend's photo up somewhere you can see—on your fridge, wall, or cell bunk.
- CONGREGATIONAL CONNECTION: Tell one friend (your cellie, a fellow parishioner, etc.) about the experience of writing/reading your first letter. Tell them why you're doing this.

FOR TEAM DISCUSSION

- Make sure everyone got their first letter sent out. Now share with each other: What did you say? How did you feel? Share your hesitations, awkward fears—then encourage each other to talk about exactly that in the first letter! Anybody receive a reply already? What did it say?

- The New Testament is maybe the only major world religion that calls letters from prison “holy scripture.” It's an epistolary tradition. How might this experience of writing a letter with someone you don't know personally give you new eyes for those letters to the people in Ephesus, Corinth, Rome, and Galatia? Can you think of other famous letters in the history of Christian, other religious and social movements?