

ONE PARISH ONE PRISONER

LEARNING MODULES

IS THIS JUST THE BEGINNING?



You've reached your hands and hearts into the American underground—the prisons, the civic burial sites, and the hidden places beneath the surface of your community.

You've seen something new.

You have been witnesses to the resurrection, even if your experience was imperfect and incomplete.

The early church movement began with a handful of women and men who had a life-altering experience at the tombs, and then ran to their wider community to tell the story and pray together about what's next.

This final module will help you follow this earliest of traditions.

"We stay in relationship. God works through relationships that transform us. We trust that and follow what God has put in front of us."

— DOUG, TEAM PASTOR

I got off the phone with Terrance, who's only been out of prison a few months. He's still wearing an ankle monitor, not even past his official "release date" yet.

He told me his One Parish One Prisoner team all gathered this past weekend, on a sunny Sunday morning, excited to see him again in person after pandemic distancing. After about an

hour of catching up about their lives, one team member asked, “So what’s next? Do we keep meeting? Are we done?”

“I just stayed quiet,” Terrance told me on the phone. “I thought I’d just see what they were thinking.”

Another team member said, “I think we are done.”

Another said, “Well, maybe we’re done with Terrance. But I think we start with the next guy now?”

The rest of the team agreed.

We are so used to programming and helping the maximum number of people. We are less used to actual relationships with those from different backgrounds than ours. Without meaning to, we often relapse right back to “program” mode.

Terrance sounded hurt telling me this on the phone. “The next guy? Oh, OK. It’s like that, then? I mean, I dunno.” He paused, not wanting to sound ungrateful, not wanting to sound foolish:

“I thought we were building lifelong friendships. Isn’t that what this was all about? I feel kinda dumb for wanting that now. I mean, if this was just a little bit of help when I get out and ‘see ya later, good luck,’ I coulda just used the resource center downtown. I didn’t know this was just a short walk kind of thing.

I don’t want to sound ungrateful for all they’ve done and all their kindness, but I thought this was about a long walk together.”

Terrance understood better than his team what this journey is all about. He knew he was just getting started.

This final module helps us look beyond the “program’s end” to imagining a “long walk together.”

Sure enough, most churches who’ve done One Parish One Prisoner so far have asked us the same question at this point—if they can start with the “next” person now?

While it’s super encouraging that these communities want more of what they’ve experienced, and though we tried pairing a few early teams with a second person, having relapsed ourselves into program efficiency/efficacy-mode, we’ve learned that’s not the way.

“Can we start with the next person?”

Our answer has become “No.”

Instead, this last module is to help your team answer three questions—to move your experience forward with your church, becoming a local resurrection community:


Instead, this last module is to help your team answer three questions—to move your experience forward with your church, becoming a local resurrection community:

What if this is just the beginning of our relationship with our resurrecting friend?

What if this is just the beginning of a transformation inside me?

What if this is just the beginning of a larger call for our church?

Everything
will be okay
in the end.
And if it's not
okay, it's not
the end.



I. WHAT IF THIS IS JUST THE BEGINNING OF OUR RELATIONSHIP?

This program has connected you, built a bridge between your worlds, a structure to assist in the resurrection and re-entry process together. Now you don't need the training wheels; you can ride as you please. Your lives are connected now. You don't need prison letters or video visits to chat now. You can text and call and see how each other are doing.

Essentially, this is your neighbor—hopefully, a friend.

And resurrection—healing, reintegrating into society from years of prison and isolation and separation from family, economy, earth—can take years.

Your active relationship may be different than what you expected or hoped for, depending on how your released friend is doing in the re-entry journey. Here are some common situations:

IF THEY'RE DOING WELL:

Stay connected! Revisit the Magic Season module: have fun thinking about ways to share life together in the land of the living!

How do you integrate this relationship into your own life and your community's life?

Monthly coffee or a walk? Is there a role at the church you can invite them to fill? Playing Greeter, Usher, or setting up for service? Invite them to join in feeding the homeless or preparing the fellowship hall when the blood drive comes. Invite them over for holiday meals and special events, like you would with a cousin or nephew new to the area.

Remember, resurrection takes years. There are so many stones to continue rolling away, for men and women who stay out of prison over a year: petitioning to remove old charges off records, starting a new lease, larger debts to cancel, custody to gain in kids' lives.

You're not "responsible" to solve everything. But we are the Department of Connections. You have immense social capital: connections. A bank manager. A lawyer. A social worker. Someone with snowshoes for a family outing or kayaks to borrow on a sunny afternoon. Tickets to the stadium for the game.

Nothing beats a good phone call. How've you been? Time to listen. Tell them how you're doing. Be real.

Mark your calendars for one year from release date. Celebrate that together.

IF THEY'RE BACK IN JAIL OR PRISON:

Stay connected! Drop a letter to the local jail, if they've been arrested. Look up their name on the county roster or the state prison database online. They probably are drowning in self-contempt, beating themselves up for letting you all down, assuming you hate them, imagining all this was a waste of time.

You can drop a note that washes that ugliness away: "We love you. We miss you." Keep it simple. You don't need to fix the entire situation. Just finding them with a word of grace is so often what resurrection looks like: think about Jesus coming to the disciples after they abandoned him. "Peace," Jesus says to break the ice, knowing our anxiety and fear and guilt. "Don't be afraid."

Get the kids to draw colorful picture. Imagine your friend opening that in a depressing jail cell with a short letter from the team: "We're not going anywhere. We're here. We care about you. Thanks for letting us get to be part of your life. You're stuck with us now ;). Hope to hear from you."

Don't send any money. Back to basics, same as at the beginning: relationship over resources. That's where the healing's at.

While your monthly meetings to discuss learning modules are wrapping up, this is hopefully just the beginning of your long relationship with someone who has only begun to taste a very different kind of care from you. It can take years to rewire brains and heal spirits that have been formed by years of untrustworthy relationships.

That's OK. We stay in relationship. God works through relationships that transform us.

So many of the men who are out of prison now and working with us at Underground Ministries? They didn't "change" their first time out of prison working with me or others.



Like Alex, above, who you may recognize from our main "Practice Resurrection" video. He and I built powerful memories together while he was out of jail or prison. After a few months, he slid right back into his underground patterns, and landed back in jail. We stayed in touch with calls and letters. Then, a long stretch—years—of silence. Then one day I got a call from Alex, from solitary confinement. He sounded so vulnerable, honest, scared. He asked if I'd be there for him again this time. He was ready. He wanted to live—a new life.

My smile nearly lifted the phone off my ear.

Your friend, through the months with your team, now has a glimpse of what is possible. It takes a while to learn freedom. To heal.

So if they write you, bring it to the team. Stay connected as a team. Look at their new release date. Do they want to try again? Don't make a decision for a few months. Just assure that you love them, and see if they stay in touch over the coming months. Watch, wait, pray. Don't be in a rush.

Don't run from the feelings. You can grieve that your friend is back in the tombs. Feel the anger. That broken heart, that weeping, it takes us right back to the start: Jesus wept when his friend Lazarus was in the tomb. It's the beginning of any resurrection story, the secret to resurrection power.

And remember everything you read last month in the heavy “Rethinking Incarceration” module: the criminal punishment industry is layered and punitive and not built with healing or restoration in mind. Your friend being back inside a facility may be a tragic (and common) overreaction of the parole/probation/arrest system. It’s possible your friend was understandably slipping and struggling, but when they needed more assistance and healthy intervention, they were snatched up like a menace to society.

This has been the case with at least half the individuals we’ve loved who’ve been sucked back into the prison system. It’s devastating to watch. It’s easier to get mad at the broken human than at the dehumanizing system.

Either way, make space for these feelings, these tears. We grieve differently—from each other and from one hour to the next. Lean in. Pray the Welcoming Prayer. You are being formed into the heart of Christ and entering the ache and power of the resurrection.

IF THEY’RE OUT ON THE STREETS, NOT RESPONDING:

Wait. Reach out occasionally, send a message that your team misses them, love them, wants to get together. And wait for them as God waits for us—with patience, tenderness, and a persistent, not-in-a-rush hope.

“God didn’t try fixing me. But he was there. Always. Until I was ready.”

— TONY, RELEASED PARTICIPANT

Another retired gentleman on the team with Tony, above, agreed. He had deepened with patience over time, and shared about his years in Alcoholics Anonymous, walking his own slow healing alongside others in recovery:

“The nice thing about a loving God is he lets us make our own choices. He won’t control us. When we get ourselves into hot water, we ask for help. He waits for that. He loves.”

— RICK, TEAM PARTICIPANT

That sounds like the Welcoming Prayer: we let go of control, and so learn the un-controlling love of God.

This is what we mean with that question we ask at each month’s team meeting: What am I learning, through this relationship, about God’s heart?

Same thing with waiting. Father Greg Boyle says, “Ours is a God who waits. Who are we not to?”

So as you wait, here’s another question to sit with: Whatever struggle or sickness is keeping your friend from entering a fuller life on this round—how many thousands of others leaving prison have this exact same story? You’ve been up close to one. Don’t be frantic. Do not despair. Heartbreak is how the heart opens.

Your story's not done. Not nearly. We'll say it again: this might just be the beginning.

So use this waiting time for needed, important, deeper reflection as a team (the next section below). Much of this final module is about this work of discernment—looking back, looking forward—for how God is guiding you.

II. WHAT IF THIS IS JUST THE BEGINNING OF A WORK INSIDE ME?

What has this relationship done to you?

We've been asking this question in our post-silence reflection questions at the start of each team meeting. God is changing our hearts as we've approached the tombs of our culture together and removed our own protective layers. How are you being transformed through this?

In our very first One Parish One Prisoner pairing, the entire church rallied around their releasing friend Lester: weekly updates during "prayers of the people," a big fundraiser to pay off fines, safe housing opportunity secured, rides lined up to take him to appointments. We picked him up from his facility and the next day all sat at a banquet table at the Mexican restaurant across town, the week after Easter! He even got a gym membership to share with one of the men on the team.

But Lester hid his mounting anxiety, insecurities, and loneliness—and soon disappeared, reaching out to the very gang and drug contacts on the streets he swore he promised himself he'd never go back to.

The team was crushed.

As we reflected together in the months that followed, and later shared with the congregation, we started to tell stories.

Like how two of the women can't help but drive slower now, all through town: "Each young man I see walking the sidewalks, I think, Is that Lester? No. Wait, is THAT Lester?"

These white, middle-class church grandmothers, who may have feared tattooed, gang-affected Mexican men in our valley for years—now they see the beloved everywhere, looking down alleyways, searching for their lost friend.

They hadn't realized this is part of God's transforming work in them, in their church! Even if Lester wasn't fully ready to transform his entire life, what if every church in America had congregants with renewed eyes and hearts for their neighbors like this? It happens through one relationship.

Folks in the church would always come up to team members and ask, "Where's Lester?" At first it made the team feel awkward, ashamed to say they didn't know, like the "program failed." Then they realized never before had they asked, with hope, why a former gang member wasn't worshipping with them that Sunday.

The congregation now felt a Lester-shaped hole in their midst.

What has this relationship done to your congregation? Your family?

III. WHAT IF THIS IS JUST THE BEGINNING OF A LARGER CONVERSATION FOR OUR CHURCH?

Like the women at Jesus' tomb on Easter morning, who ran to the other disciples, the next step is to bring your experience to the rest of your congregation.

Some disciples weren't moved until they saw—and touched—the wounds inflicted by the justice system on their beloved.

What wounds have you touched in this journey of relationship out of today's tombs? What suffering in your community did you touch in your released friend's story?

What wounds were inflicted by the justice system on your beloved friend? What wounds did you uncover in yourselves, your own team?

What healing has happened? What kind of heartbreak has opened some of your hearts? What has God done?

The women leaving the tombs surely had to tell their experience over and over again. Same for you now.

Telling the stories of your journey with your released friend to the rest of your faith community is what's next. Several Sundays in a row, if you can, share about what you've read, questioned, and meditated on. Bring your released friend to share with others, often.

It took the early disciples a while for the implications of the resurrection to sink in. And then they had new inspiration. Be patient.

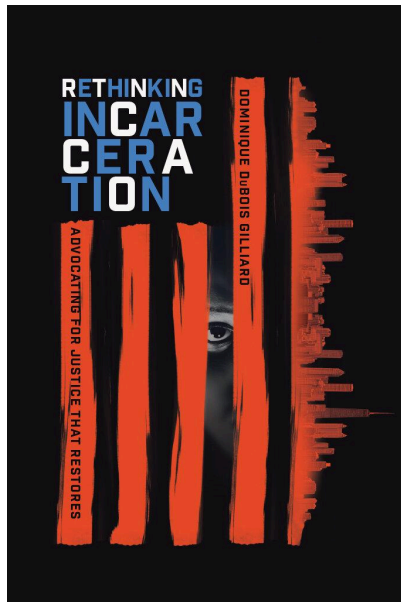
A SEASON OF SHARED LISTENING AS A CHURCH

After sharing the personal experiences of your team members and your released friend with the wider congregation, we suggest this month you choose one of the resources below, and invite the entire church to read a book or watch a video together.

You can host a series of discussions. What do you want the rest of your congregation to see that you've now seen? What do you want them to be part of? Could God be inviting your entire church closer to your friend, and to the underground?

After the disciples on Easter morning bore witness to glimpses of the resurrection, they told the story and gathered with the rest of the disciples to pray together.

Which of these resources best tells the story of what you've seen?



RETHINKING INCARCERATION: Dominique Gilliard has written the leading Christian response to mass incarceration in *Rethinking Incarceration*. This will land differently now that you have walked with someone out of the system. Now that your church has prayed for, embraced, and learned to care for a formerly-incarcerated neighbor. This is the perfect book to read now—as a congregation, as a book club, as part of your Bible study.

Dominique even created an excellent 8-video series to guide and invite your larger community into these biblical, legal, social and urgent questions today:



walkingtowardslove.com/series/rethinking-incarceration/



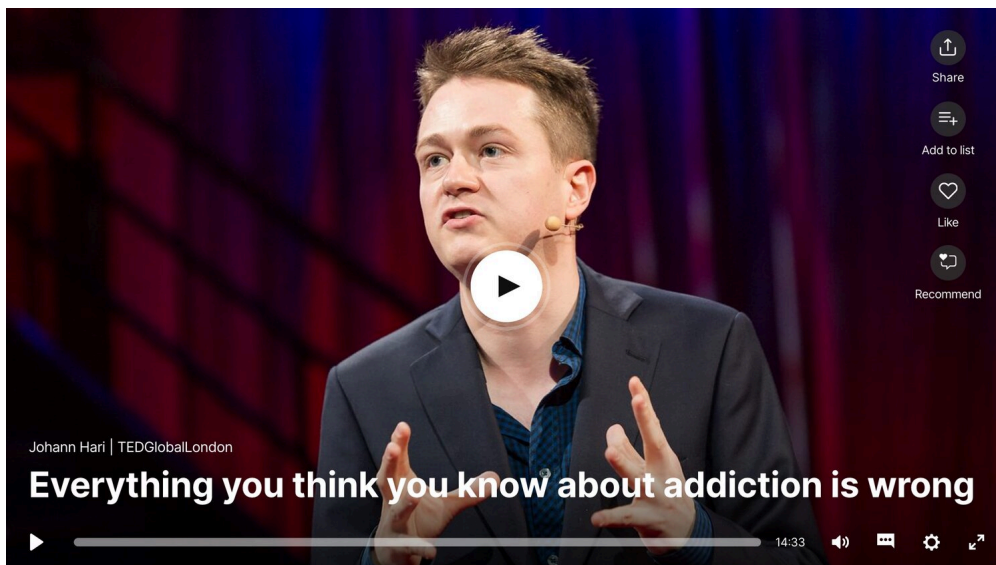
Just Mercy (2019)

World-renowned civil rights defense attorney Bryan Stevenson works to free a wrongly condemned death row prisoner. Starring Michael B. Jordan, Brie Larson, and Jamie Foxx.



13th (2016)

In this thought-provoking documentary, scholars, activists and politicians analyze the criminalization of African Americans and the U.S. prison boom.



Ted Talk: Everything you think you know about addiction is wrong / Johann Hari

Remember this? Over 17 million views on this Ted Talk.

What really causes addiction — to everything from cocaine to smart-phones? And how can we overcome it? Johann Hari has seen our current methods fail firsthand, as he has watched loved ones struggle to manage their addictions. He started to wonder why we treat addicts the way we do — and if there might be a better way.

THE NEXT CHURCH

Here at the end of the One Parish One Prisoner journey, we come back to our question at the very start:

“What if EVERY CHURCH was in relationship with one person releasing from prison into their community?”

That’s the vision.

This movement grows not by your church taking on “the next guy,” but something better: you all continue the “long walk” with your resurrecting friend and help “the next church” join One Parish One Prisoner.

There’s a few ways you can do this.

PASTOR TO PASTOR

Pastors on the team usually are the most able to share One Parish One Prisoner with other pastors. Tell some of your colleagues in the area about your experience. Send them the link: oneparishoneprisoner.org. Send them the videos. Tell them how it’s been good for your congregation.

REGIONAL CHURCH NETWORK

Some of our teams have taken this directly to their bishop, executive presbyter, synod, or city church council and said, “What if all our churches in our network did this?” We have cities and denominations starting such regional organizing. The shared missional energy, clear vision, congregants engaging directly into justice issues and into relationship with their own local communities . . . it’s becoming an easy sell.

SPREAD THE WORD

Who do you know in other churches, in other states maybe, who might be very interested in One Parish One Prisoner? Pray about it. Share the videos, the links, and most importantly share your story. Talk about it on social media. Point them to us. We’ll get them started.

BECOME A MENTOR TO ANOTHER TEAM

Don’t just spread the word. Offer one or two team members to be available as expert - navigator - supports alongside new teams. We recently paired a team who recently experienced immigration barriers with another facing the same with their releasing friend.

“We have such a great tool kit now. How do we share this or use this for the next person?”

— LINDA, TEAM PARTICIPANT

BECOME A DONOR

We’ve only gotten this far—building what you just experienced and reaching your region—because folks have joined us as ongoing donors. If you believe in what you’ve just experienced, you can help this movement grow and mobilize more resurrection communities by making Underground Ministries part of your monthly / yearly giving:

undergroundministries.org/give

ACTION STEPS THIS MONTH

- CALL OR CONTACT YOUR RELEASED FRIEND THIS WEEK: If they're available, find a time to meet up and do something together.
- FINAL DEPARTING INTERVIEW
- FINAL TEAM MEETING: Have a meal together. Set aside a good two hours to reflect together on all the questions in this module and in the final survey (summarized once more below).
- PLAN A TIME TO BRING THESE STORIES AND QUESTIONS TO THE LARGER CHURCH SOON

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- As described above, gather for a meal and ask yourselves these questions, after your time of Welcoming Prayer. Write down what comes. Bring it to church leadership and larger congregation the way the disciples did after leaving the emptied tomb:
- How can we continue natural rhythms of ongoing relationship and sharing life with our released friend, beyond the "program" and learning modules?
- How can each of us speak about and continue the work that's begun inside of us?
- How might we continue this conversation about the wounds we've touched with the larger church—and our local community?
- Is there one book or video from these learning modules that we'd like to invite the entire church to read or watch together—and pray about next steps?
- What if the One Parish One Prisoner program we've just finished was just the beginning of something bigger God has for our church? Do we want to look at the bonus module?