

# ONE PARISH ONE PRISONER

LEARNING MODULES

## THE LOST ART OF LETTER WRITING

Prison letters make up much of the New Testament.  
It's also how we start a new relationship.



There's a quality of connection in written letters 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 might be a little anxious.

“Scared as hell,” one thirty-something team member told me last year. But she later told me, “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.”

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

— Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Letters are where we in One Parish One Prisoner discover each other.

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

Someone in prison is likely asking, Is this just a nice person in the community, or are these people who really care about the real me? Can I picture myself actually spending time with these people when I'm out?

In a recent One Parish One Prisoner Kickoff Orientation, a new congregant asked our longtime friend Alex—who wrote to us for years while he was in maximum-security prison facilities—what he thought a “good letter” is.

Alex 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.”

— Alex



## OUR GOAL: RELATIONSHIPS OF TRUST

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

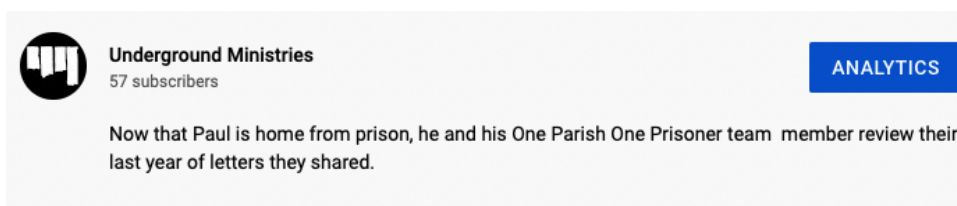
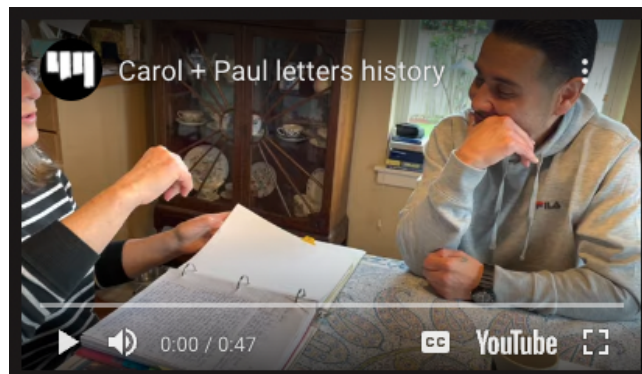
### CONSISTENCY

Most folks in prison carry a deep wound of abandonment. They've been dropped or forgotten repeatedly. We can either be part of the healing of this wound or a deepening of it. It can be devastating for someone in prison to begin a relationship with someone on the outside and then have that relationship terminated prematurely because the person on the outside has lost interest or gets too busy to stay in touch.

Consistency, then, is even more important than the content of your letters. It communicates to them that they are valuable. Not disposable or forgettable.

So pick a day of the week—every other week. Put it on the calendar. (Seriously, do this now.)

Look at 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 home. This is consistency.



To view this video, visit: [undergroundministries.org/carol-and-paul](https://undergroundministries.org/carol-and-paul)

### CURIOSITY

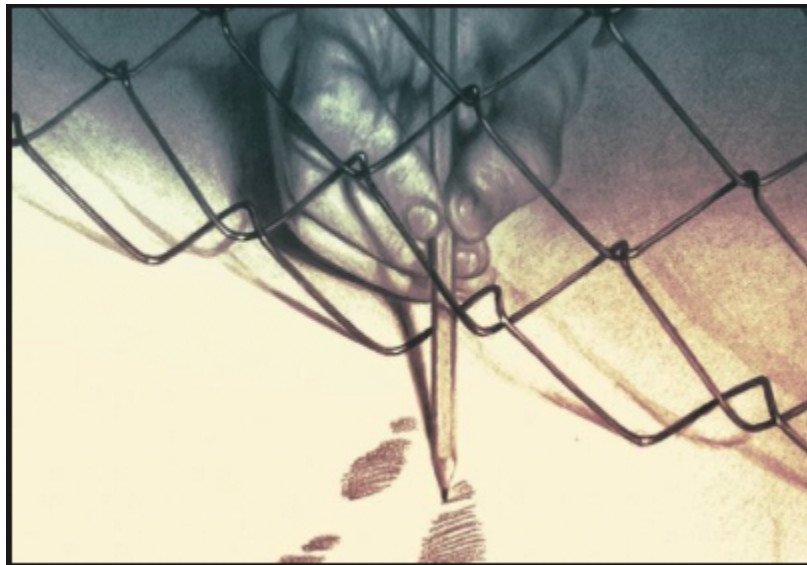
We don't give advice, coach, correct, or mentor. We may learn something that concerns us, or bothers us. The holiest stance is to be curious. To wonder, with compassion: What's the story that has brought this person to this belief, desire, or attitude? And: Do I have assumptions I could re-examine?

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

## KINSHIP

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

You just being your authentic self invites another to just be themselves.



## PRISON LETTERS ARE RADICAL

Much of the New Testament—what Christians have called holy scripture—is prison letters. Many were written by a formerly violent aggressor (Paul the Apostle) trying to describe something new, building relationships with new communities, many who had trouble trusting him. You are participating in this story, this form, now. Maybe you'll read Paul's letters differently now.

You are also dipping into an important tradition: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "Letters and Papers from Prison"; Martin Luther King Jr's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Not to mention the prophet Jeremiah's oracles from the pit and the chained stocks.

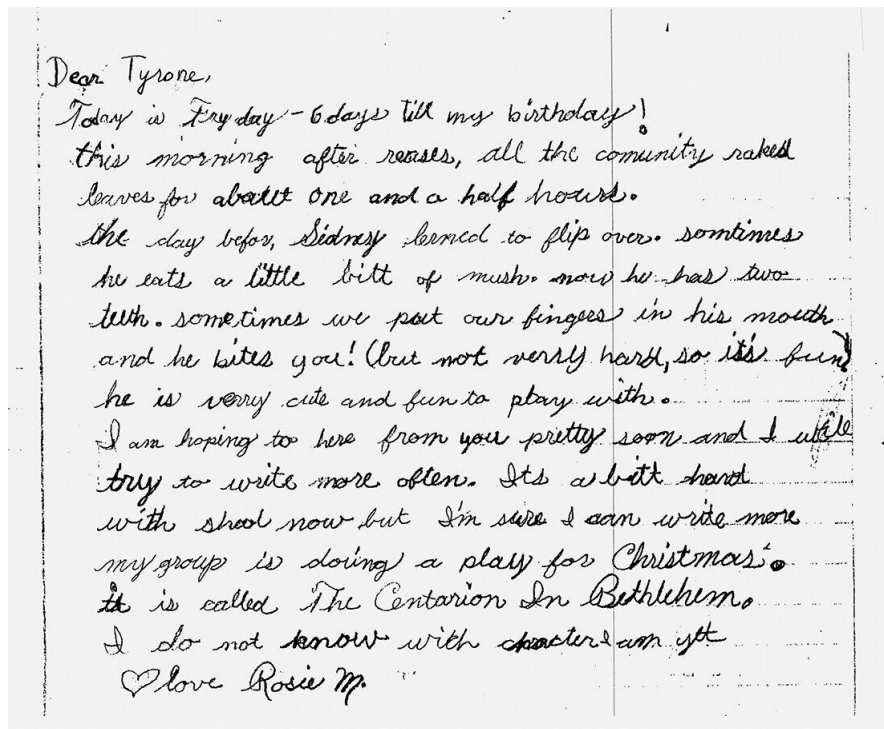
The word of the Lord, our tradition repeatedly dares to say, might not just go into prisons, but be coming *from* prison cells. Why would we want to miss out?

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?

Most everyone in prison is suspicious of other people’s motives. Especially for helping. So be as honest as you 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.

### A Day in the Life

One way to introduce ourselves and discover each other’s lives 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. Then ask your new friend to tell you about a day in their life inside the facility. 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.

A screenshot of a YouTube video player. The video title is "Induction | Episode 1 | The Zo | The Marshall Project". The video has 17,335 views and was posted on Feb 27, 2020. The channel is "The Marshall Project" with 15K subscribers. The video content shows a hand drawing a sketch of a prison hallway with the text "The Zo" in the center. The video player interface includes a search bar, play button, and progress bar.

To view this video visit:  
[youtube.com/watch?v=EE33jJirvk8](https://youtube.com/watch?v=EE33jJirvk8)



## A Turning Point

Those leaving the underground are very aware of the need 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? Then ask your new friend if they had a moment when they knew they wanted to change.

## Laughter

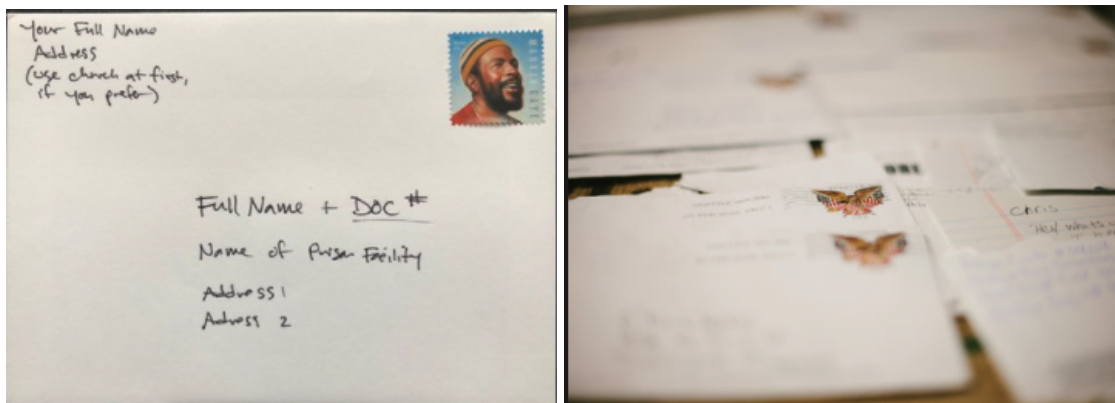
What makes us laugh is often layered with story about us. What made you laugh this week? Share that. Ask your friend to share a story of what made them laugh this week.

## Shadows

Often people writing to those locked up share something difficult 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 by someone, and model to them our own imperfect humanity. See what happens. (Here’s a prompt if you’re stuck: *“What was the worst day in your life? I want to tell you about mine...”*)

## TECHNICAL STUFF

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



Simple envelopes and paper only—typed or handwritten. Adhesive, glitter, fancy cards are rejected.

## PHOTOS

We strongly encourage you to send photos as often as you can. Photos from the outside are *gold* for men and women inside prison. Here are the basic guidelines:

- You can't print them onto normal paper at home. They have to be on photographic paper from a photo shop.
- 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 will be rejected.
- Write your friend's LAST NAME and DOC NUMBER on the back of each photo you stick into the envelope.

## BOOKS

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

## 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.

It used to be only JPay. The mass migration across WA DOC facilities to SECURUS is underway (as of Feb. 2023). But it's not 100% complete yet.





IF YOUR NEW FRIEND IS AT A MEN'S FACILITY, go to [JPay.com](http://JPay.com), set up an account, search for your person with their WA DOC number, and put in a credit card to buy a few "stamps." Each email is a stamp. Feel free to "attach a stamp" with each email so they can reply. Or even "Transfer Stamps." It might pop up a screen because your friend is on the [SECURUS network](#). Follow the prompts and get set up.

IF YOUR NEW FRIEND IS AT A WOMEN'S FACILITY, go directly to [securustech.online/#/login](http://securustech.online/#/login) and follow the prompts. It's going to be fine. It's clunky and slow and sometimes takes a week to accept your login, but this is what we have to work with.

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

## MONEY

A key component of our program is avoiding all the entanglements of Giver/Asker dynamics that come with money and resources. Why? So that we can create a space for strings-free relationship. For that reason we do not send money (on inmates' accounts, food packages, phone accounts, or to girlfriends or boyfriends in need outside prison). We will share much more, soon, 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.

We do have a few exceptions for using some small finances to assist letters and calls:

- Help with snail mail postage. We want to help them buy stamped envelopes (postage account) or "transfer stamps" on JPay periodically. Incarcerated folks purchase "envelopes, stamped with... stamps" to write to their parish team members. Keep them supplied with these envelopes to keep the conversation going.
  - Go to the WESTERN UNION money order for incarcerated people page ([westernunion.com/ues/en/send-money/app/sendinmatestart](http://westernunion.com/ues/en/send-money/app/sendinmatestart)) and click through...
    - "Washington Dept Corrections" or other facility
    - the amount, name, and DOC number
    - for the middle name, write FOR POSTAGE in all caps like this

Click through and submit payment and you'll get a confirmation page with the tracking number. SEND that number to your friend (or poke us here [info@undergroundministries.org](mailto:info@undergroundministries.org), and we'll reach out to them with number so they get to it faster).

Transfer postage. This is easier,—clunky as the JPay/SECURUS site is. With every email you send, you can check a box to attach a return stamp for your friend to write back with.

You can also TRANSFER STAMPS over to your friend from your stash. That's something we do often from our desk, to help get the ball rolling with between our incarcerated friends and their team.

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. To set up a securus account for phone calls visit <https://securustech.online/#/enroll>.

Your releasing friend might ask to receive or borrow money. They might have a good reason. A standard response to share with your incarcerated person is always, "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 relationship, not resources.

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

But just writing 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 INCARCERATED FRIEND
- SEND A PHOTO OF YOURSELF! Not printed from your home printer, but it has to be a real “developed” photo. You have to write your friend’s last name and DOC number on the back. Tell them 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 in their cell.
- PRINT THEIR PHOTO. Put it on your fridge!

## FOR DISCUSSION

- Make sure everyone got their first letter sent out. Now share with each other: What did you say?
- Anybody receive a reply already? If so, what did it say?
- Encourage each other to all get over the first letter together, this week. Share your hesitations, awkward fears—then encourage each other to talk about exactly that in the first letter!
- What positive memories might you have of a written letter earlier in your life? Did any reach you when you were in a hard place? How did that letter affect you?
- The New Testament is maybe the only major world religion that calls letters from prison “holy scripture.” We have an epistolary faith. 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 and social movements?