

To Be One Body: Prison Ministry in NYYM

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A Friend in my local meeting recently described prison ministry as my “passion.” The word surprised me—passion—it never occurred to me that I have been attending a prison worship group because I was passionate about it, or that our meeting has been engaged in a greeting card ministry for incarcerated and isolated Friends for over 15 years because I was passionate about it. So why do I do these things? Because I am enriched by the interactions I have with these Friends. Friends who are incarcerated cannot physically join me at my local meeting, so some of us worship in a local prison. Worshipping in prison is not something I do as charity; I go because it fills me with Spirit, it renews my soul, and I am in fellowship with others on the journey. Maybe you attend your local meeting for similar reasons.

Our Yearly Meeting is blessed to have a rich community of Friends, some of whom live behind the walls of prisons. We have Quaker Worship or Interfaith Groups in 8 New York State prisons, but members of our Body are incarcerated all over New York, even in prisons where there is no Quaker group.

Some “inside” Friends have started to reach out to meetings in their local areas, writing to clerks in the hopes of nurturing connections with “outside” Friends. If your meeting receives such a letter, please respond. Let Friends inside know how Spirit is alive in your life and in the life of your meeting.

Outside Friends can connect with inside Friends in many ways. If you would like to try attending a Prison Worship Group, you will need to go through the process to become a Registered volunteer with the NYS Department of Corrections and Supervision (DOCCS). If you do AVP in prison, you already have volunteer status and attending a worship group would be simpler to arrange. Registered Volunteers can attend Quaker Worship Groups as they are able. Some people attend weekly, monthly, or even just one or two times per year.

Our Body has a great need to build up a network of Spiritual Visitors and Correspondents with incarcerated Friends. Being a visitor/correspondent is distinct from being a volunteer. In fact, if you do one, you are not permitted by DOCCS to do the other. Spiritual Visitors can meet with and correspond with incarcerated Friends, just as any other friend or family member of

an incarcerated person would. Visits take place in a visitation room during regular visiting hours, which vary at each prison.

Correspondence can include letters and phone calls. For Friends who have been transferred to a prison that does not have a Quaker Worship Group, this type of interaction is essential. Here's why: the prison system does not allow volunteers to be in touch with the men from our Prison Worship Groups if they are transferred. Being "gathered together into one Body" absolutely depends on outside Friends who are not registered prison volunteers. If you don't live near a prison but feel you could write on occasion and take a call every now and then, becoming a Spiritual Correspondent would be a way to "sustain and deepen our Society" and to deepen your personal experience of the Spirit. My meeting has been engaged in a greeting card ministry for over a decade. Greeting cards let inside Friends know we remember them, care about them, and love them. Incarcerated Friends from all over NY State write to our meeting to tell us how much this simple act means to them.

If you feel led to be a part of prison ministry but are concerned about the expenses of travel or collect calls, The NYYM Prisons Committee has funds available to support the work. What do you need to get started?

The first time I attended a prison worship group, I went because I could: my work hours and location allowed me to be available when many other Friends would not be. So I went, and I never turned back. I have met people who have taught me and inspired me. I have laughed, cried, and experienced true community. This might be yours, too, and may be right in your own backyard.

For more information, contact the Yearly Meeting Office (office@nyym.org; 212-673-5750) to connect with the Prisons Committee.