



## **MAX Prison and Jail Ministry**

### **Pen Pal Letter Writing Ministry**

#### **Scope**

This ministry is to provide encouragement and good-will towards those individuals in local correctional institutions by developing a friendly relationship through routine letter correspondence. We are trying to live up to Jesus' message in Matthew 25: "When I was in prison, you came to visit me..."

#### **A Brief Overview**

In prison, the inmate is stripped of their freedoms and most of their dignity. They become institutionalized, meaning that someone else is making all their life decisions for them. Some of these people will be in prison the rest of their lives and some are sitting on death row, awaiting execution. We have an opportunity to make a difference to them. We can be a small light in a very dark world. By providing a sympathetic ear, we can show them that someone cares about them.

The goal of writing to a person in prison is to promote exchange of friendly letters and not to provide financial assistance or romantic involvement.

Pen Pals help prisoners stay aware of the world outside of prison, particularly the area where they resided.

Through your letters, show compassion, caring, and understanding. Help improve the offender's self-esteem. Remember that your prison pen pal may be very vulnerable and life may seem relatively hopeless. A primary thought your pen pal may have is about being free and how to attain freedom. This can lead to manipulation.

A prisoner's mood may change daily. Life in prison is a complex system that those of us on the "outside" have no way of understanding.

#### **Expectations**

If you start this ministry, you will be assigned an inmate at a local correctional institution to correspond at least one time per month.

There is no set length to the relationship, but we hope that you'd give it one year, longer is better. Your expenses would be that of the stamps and paper and envelopes. Some dos and don'ts are listed below.

#### **Dos and Don'ts**

Most people are nervous in dealing with those who are incarcerated. If you follow the guidelines given below, that should assuage some of your apprehensions and help you to establish a friendship with your assigned inmate. These recommendations are GENERAL. They fit most situations. All the information listed here is posted elsewhere on the Internet and is from our own experience and the experiences of others that write letters to inmates. It is not intended to reflect the views of the MDOC. These guidelines are posted for your edification and no one associated with this posting accepts responsibility for your actions. This is a truly rewarding Ministry and

God will bless you for participating in it. This is not meant to scare anyone but certain precautions are necessary. Let God take the lead and then follow Him.

1. The first step is to pray and seek God's guidance and blessing. Then you can check out the list below.
2. Examine your motives. Offering another person some encouragement and hope through the Word of God is the goal. Do not try to meet your own needs. If you are becoming a pen pal because you are lonely, then you might end up getting hurt.
3. Do treat your pen-pal with dignity. Everyone is a child of God and we need to recognize this in everyone. Do listen and be sympathetic.
4. Do talk about your life in generalities; talk about hobbies, sports, your family, where you're from, etc. Share experiences with your pen-pal and make sure to listen to theirs. You must be very careful what you put in a letter. Write about current events, what's happening in your life and how the Lord has worked in your life but don't give out your children's names, schools, and other personal information you wouldn't want broadcast to complete strangers.
5. Do pray for them; they need it.
6. Do use their ID number. They are assigned a prison ID number; always use it on all your correspondence. If you send a letter to an offender without the assigned ID number. Your letter will be automatically returned.
7. Do use prudence in your letters to your pen-pal. You are being a Christ to them by this ministry, never say anything that could reflect badly on you. Use only your first name and have mail directed to the Office of Life & Justice.
8. Do keep your letters to 1-2 pages.
9. Do find ways to offer encouragement and give hope. Many inmates have not had the social interactions that would have taught them how to make good decisions or help them solve problems.
10. Do not be preachy, judgmental, or condescending towards your pen-pal. Do not push your personal beliefs onto the prisoner. Remember that this is an outreach and keep the Lord in your correspondence.
11. Do not get too deeply involved in their crime, their trial, or any appeals. They will naturally want to talk about these issues, and that is ok, but don't dwell on them. Remember you're not their lawyer; you're just trying to be a friend. Do not promise something that you cannot deliver. Even if you are a lawyer, do not give legal advice.
12. Don't agree to do any errands or favors for them on the outside. Doing such things will often get them (and us) in trouble.
13. Don't rush the relationship you are developing with a prisoner. Allow them to discuss their life on their own initiative. Dedication and time will help build positive long-lasting relationships.
14. It is recommended not getting on an inmate's visiting list. It blurs the boundaries between a pen pal and a personal friend. Prisoners look forward to mail call and will be happy to hear from you.
15. Do not send pictures of yourself or give detailed personal information out to your pen-pal, like your address, where you work, etc. Use only your first name or your pen name.
16. Watch your safety. Even if you send photos to family members in prison, other prisoners have access to and can steal from their belongings. Whether you are sending pictures to a family member or just a pen pal, be sure to not send anything which could put you in danger in any way. This includes not writing last names on the back of the photo and being aware of the background scenery of your photo. Many inmates are expert at determining the exact location of a picture by the background scenery and clues which can be found in the photo. When writing to your prisoner, do not use your house address; please use the Pen Pal Ministry address listed below. Even if you are writing to someone you trust, sadly, most everyone has an enemy in prison, those enemies have access to your photos and letters.
17. Do not send money or gifts or anything like stamps, religious metals, money. The guards will confiscate them and the prisoner will lose their writing privileges. A small prayer card or poem is allowed, but not one that is laminated or sealed in plastic.
18. Do not contact the offender's family, friends, attorney or parole officer. Families may have no contact orders. The request may be a manipulation of the pen pal to get something done that is illegal.
19. It isn't necessary to ask them what they did to get to prison. It is public information. You can usually find it on the internet.

20. Be patient waiting on your pen-pal's response, many prisoners are limited financially. If you become concerned feel free to write them another letter. They are NOT limited in their mail intake. Something to remember about the incarcerated writing to others: One letter may cost them as much as \$0.55 to \$0.60 for postage, envelope & paper. Double that if the offender is writing to two pen-pals. It may not be an issue for the offender if he/she is working or has support from family and friends. If not, he/she may be living on as little as \$7.50 per month of which he/she must purchase all personal care items and toilet paper.
21. NEVER write more than one prisoner in the same prison. If you choose to have more than one pen-pal, try to assure they are located in another state. This helps the development of trust between you and your pen-pal. It also protects the prisoner from becoming "jealous" of your other relationship.
22. Never send money. If an inmate asks you for money, you should say no. If you say no and they ask again then you should rethink the situation and the inmate's motive. Scams are prevalent with prison pen pals. Always check the prison regulations before sending anything other than your letter to the prison. Most prisons will not allow stamps to be sent in with letters. MDOC Mailroom Rules are found on page 17/46 of the MDOC Family & Friends Guide found at [www.lifeandjusticekcsj.org](http://www.lifeandjusticekcsj.org).
23. Please note: Family and friends of offenders incarcerated within the Missouri Department of Corrections are required to send pictures and personal correspondence in separate mailings. Any envelope received, which contains both pictures and personal correspondence, will be returned to the sender.

Send your letters directly to your pen pal. On your letterhead & return address section, please use the address for the Pen Pal Ministry at The Catholic Center:

Pen Pal Program – Office of Life & Justice  
Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph  
20 West 9th Street  
Kansas City, MO 64105

Please contact the Office of Life & Justice for further guidance on starting this ministry at your parish or to be linked to a parish already doing this ministry for letter writing.

Visit [www.lifeandjusticekcsj.org](http://www.lifeandjusticekcsj.org) for more letter writing prompts and helps.