

Some individuals find it difficult to converse with an inmate. How do you get to know an inmate? How do you talk to one? Is there a secret way to do so? There is no secret in conversing or communicating with an inmate. One must remember that the inmate is a human being, just like any other person. This is where most people make their greatest mistake. Often a person, many times a professed Christian, will go into a correctional institution with the idea of "going to the zoo to see the animals" and at the same time he or she is trying to cure all of humanity's problems.

We must never lose sight of who an inmate is and why he is incarcerated. Every inmate is there because he has allegedly broken the laws of society and must pay with the loss of his freedom. Some are innocent, some are guilty. Some are there due to the greed and selfishness of others. Some wanted only to provide for members of their families and were not given a decent chance to do so. A volunteer must consider all of these things.

One inmate who had been incarcerated for seven years after being sentenced to fifty-one years, felt that ignorance was the real crime. Of ignorance he stated, "too bad someone can't capture it and convert it into a tangible. With ignorance locked in a box most of the world's troubles would be solved."

It is rather difficult to empathize with an incarcerated individual unless you have shared a similar experience. One should never say, "I know how you feel" if you have never been in prison, because you don't. Better to say, "it must be very difficult for you." By your actions and words an inmate can determine your prison experience and even the sincerity of your efforts.

A volunteer should offer friendship first, teaching second and preaching third. Once you are accepted by an inmate the battle is half won because then he is more apt to listen to what you have to say. Remember, first the inmate must accept you as a friend, and in so doing he learns to accept himself as a valuable human being. Getting the inmate to realize that not everyone "on the outside" has rejected him plays a major role in learning to know and relate to him.

The first question usually on an inmate's mind is "what's in this for you?" He is skeptical about anyone from the "outside" as he has often been lied to, had unfulfilled promises and been disappointed and frustrated by many "do-gooders."

You can go into an institution talking about "Jesus cares" but the inmate sees you. He wants to know, "do you care?" Once he/she has decided that you do care, then you can begin to explain that God works through human instruments. In other words, you should first approach an inmate with a statement such as, "I am here because I love you and care about your physical, mental and spiritual well-being. Because I care, I'd like to share the source of my happiness with you, so that you too may know real joy and peace."

Not everyone will accept you with friendship. Some are there with the same attitudes that crucified Jesus, thus we must as the Scriptures say, "be wise as serpents and harmless as doves." It will take "pure, unadulterated love" to deal with some of these attitudes.