

## **Theory of Change: Restoring Prisoners' Lives and Relationships So They Desist From Crime**

Restorative Justice Exchange  
An initiative of Prison Fellowship International

Many factors contribute to breaking cycles of crime, but Prison Fellowship International (PFI) finds two drivers to be most relevant and effective. **First**, prisoners form new positive self-identities that replace past negative self-identities, and **second**, they develop healthy social relationships that support them when they return home. These ideas are interconnected: prisoners are more likely to seek and develop healthy social relationships as part of the self-identity transformation process.

**1) Transforming self-identity.** When prisoners change their self-view, weaving their experiences into new hope-filled narratives, they are more likely to desist from criminal behavior. Through “redemption scripts,” they turn their past lives into something purposeful. Ongoing identity transformation leads prisoners to and through a “crystallization of discontent” where dissatisfaction about prior failures becomes linked to criminal identity. Slowly, they take responsibility for their past while simultaneously adopting a positive identity.

**2) Forming healthy social relationships.** Spiritual transformation requires prisoners to form healthy social relationships as they transition back into the community; these provide needed accountability and support them as they acclimate to non-prison life. In-prison conversion experiences create a bridge to growing healthy relationships and resources on the outside.

Families and churches often play an integral role in supporting prisoners in reentry, when these positive relationships are intentionally formed and maintained. The process starts well before inmates are released, since incarceration isolates and cuts off prisoners from their families.

**National ministry programs that catalyze prisoner identity transformation and strengthen their relationships with family and church communities contribute to breaking the cycle of crime.**

When inmates participate in programs that prompt reflection on spiritual elements and offer life purpose, it fuels inner transformation – which is then augmented by healthy relationships and supportive communities post-release. Practices that strengthen connections among prisoners, their families, and church communities foster these supportive relationships and promote stable environments into which prisoners can integrate.

**PFI already offers programs, delivered at the local level in culturally appropriate ways, that work toward outcomes of long-term transformation and stability for prisoners.**

- The Prisoner’s Journey (TPJ) takes inmates through the Gospel of Mark and introduces them to Jesus, the prisoner. It creates space for prisoners to know Jesus, so they can begin a journey to comprehend God’s love for them that gives meaning and purpose to their lives.
- The Sycamore Tree Project (STP) helps prisoners understand the impact of their crime and take responsibility for the harm they have caused, including to family members.
- The Child’s Journey (TCJ) and PromisePath address the physical and spiritual needs of children and their families when a parent is incarcerated, and they help children stay connected with their incarcerated parent.

These programs benefit prisoners, ex-prisoners, and their families and build bridges with local churches. National ministries engage church communities around their prison- and family-focused programs, motivating them and increasing empathy for prisoners and their families. They are also primary sources for volunteers who assist in prison-related programs.

**National ministry programs are more effective when they provide a coordinated response that connects and strengthens relationships among prisoners, their families, and local church communities.** Beyond contributing to positive long-term outcomes for prisoners, national ministries make an even deeper impact when they *first*, create coordinated response that connects prisoners, their families, and church communities and *second*, facilitate long-lasting relationships between prisoners, their families, and church communities to form supportive post-release communities.

**1) Create a unifying and connective response that can strengthen programming by:**

- Connecting existing prison programs with each other (e.g., NMs that run TPJ and STP can coordinate programs and encourage prisoners to participate in both).
- Connecting prison programs with children/family-focused programs (e.g., NMs that run TCJ and/or STP can reach out to families of prisoner participants about PromisePath or TCJ and vice versa).
- Connecting church communities with prison- and children/family-focused programs. Churches, prisoners, and their families all benefit when they all involved parties have interconnected programming. For example, NMs can connect church communities involved in children/family-focused programs with volunteer opportunities for prison programs, so churches develop relationships with incarcerated parents and their families.

**2) Facilitate strong, long-lasting relationships between prisoners, their families, and church communities, so there are supportive communities prisoners can rely upon when released.**

National ministry programs facilitate connections between prisoners, their families, and the church. But generally NMs do not prioritize building and maintaining these relationships in such a way that inmates can rely upon them after they leave prison.

For example, in STP and TPJ, while prisoners and church volunteers participate in sessions together (and many times become friends), volunteers often come from different communities than those to which prisoners return upon their release. Even when volunteers are from the same communities, often their connections with prisoners end when the programs conclude.

In STP, prisoners reflect upon harm they caused others, including their families and others in their communities. But often, NMs give no opportunities for prisoners to connect with their families or others in their community, so they can address problems or past harms. These missing opportunities means that prior issues will likely continue to burden and hamper important relationships when prisoners are eventually released.

In TCJ and PromisePath, children (and sometimes families) meet their incarcerated parents. But national ministries could make responses more restorative if they strengthened these family relationships, including addressing harm or tension within them. In addition, NMs could sensitize local church communities, equipping them to care for and support prisoners as they return to their communities.

National ministries can strengthen their overall programmatic response by:

- Deepening relationships between children and families and their incarcerated parents, so families are prepared for the incarcerated parent to rejoin them after they leave prison.
- Connecting and building relationships between incarcerated parents and churches, so there are positive social networks to which prisoners and their families can belong.
- Connecting prison program graduates with their families, and potentially others in the community, and providing opportunities to strengthen and repair harm in these relationships.
- Facilitating ongoing relationships between prisoners and church community volunteers whenever possible, so prisoners can rely upon these relationships when they leave prison.
- Building relationships with churches in communities where prisoners plan to return, in situations where no volunteers live in these communities.

When National Ministry programs provide coordinated responses that strengthen relationships and repair harm, it is more likely that strong social networks among prisoners, families and churches will be available for inmates upon their release. These healthy, supportive relationships become lifelines for prisoners during the struggles and temptations they inevitably face after they return home.