

# Ten steps to building bridges, not walls

## 1. Acknowledge the dignity of every human being

*As Christians, we are called to acknowledge the human dignity of all people, even those who have done great harm through their crimes* (Statement, p.12).

We are all sinners. Have you ever wondered how easy it might have been, in different circumstances, to find yourself in court – maybe even facing a prison sentence?

Be aware of and challenge stereotypes and judgemental statements about prisoners and people who have served their sentences. Sir Gerard Brennan, former Chief Justice of Australia, said: 'Prisoners, no less than the free, are our brothers and sisters and we have been silent too often when their human dignity has been diminished'.

## 2. Support prison chaplains

Find out what you can do to support the prison chaplains in your diocese or local area. Contact your diocesan office to find out who the prison chaplains are.

## 3. Support people in prison

There are many ways to support people who are in prison: praying for them, writing letters, or visiting. Any activity needs to be engaged in sensitively and sensibly. Contact a prison chaplain or a network that offers support and training.

Some groups that do this are:

- **Prison Fellowship**, which suggests a variety of prisoner support activities. <http://prisonfellowship.org.au/>
- **Kairos**, a local community-based Christian ministry that serves those in prison and their families and friends. <http://www.kairos.org.au/>
- **Cana Community**, which runs a mentoring programme. <http://www.cana.org.au>

## 4. Support prisoners when they are released

*Released prisoners often find it very hard to turn their lives around. When they leave prison, they will probably have few friends other than other ex-prisoners. As communities of faith, we can ask ourselves what comfort and support a person leaving prison would be likely to find in our parish church* (Statement, p. 13).

Chaplains or organisations such as CatholicCare or the St Vincent de Paul Society can suggest practical ways you can support prisoners returning to the community. Finding accommodation and work is difficult for them for many reasons – for example, released prisoners often do not have decent clothes and cannot afford to buy them.

## 5. Support the families of those who are in prison

A prison saying goes: 'We do the crime but the family does the time'. The website for Kairos prison ministry says: 'Often the families, especially the women, are the forgotten victims of someone else's crime'. The vast majority of women in prison are mothers, frequently the sole supporters of their children.

Organisations like Kairos and Prison Fellowship work to support such families, often in simple ways like providing transport for prison visits or buying Christmas presents for a child whose parent is in jail.

## **6. Take up the challenge to engage in realistic critique**

*Whenever we hear prisoners being discussed in our parliaments or in the media, let us ask whether the dignity of prisoners is being respected. Is prison being viewed as a last resort? If we are expanding our prisons, what are we doing to expand the health, education and welfare services that will ensure that today's disadvantaged children are not tomorrow's prisoners?* (Statement, p. 13)

How do you speak and think about prisons and people who are or have been prisoners? Whenever you hear prisoners being discussed in the media, in parliament or in social gatherings, be aware of stereotypes and misinformation. Call talk-back radio, write letters to the editor, or visit our local politicians, and challenge calls for tougher bail conditions and sentencing, which put more people in prison for longer.

## **7. Learn about and promote alternatives to prison**

*While society does need prison as a last-resort punishment and sanction, research raises doubts about its capacity to rehabilitate and deter offenders.* (Statement, p. 11)

Prison is hugely expensive. Australia spends about \$2.5 billion on corrective services, and there are many alternatives that are more effective and less costly. Some examples are diversionary programmes (such as Drug Courts), conferencing and restorative justice programmes. You can let your friends and colleagues know about these facts – and let your elected representatives know that you support them.

## **8. Address the social factors that lead to imprisonment**

Many prisoners come from a background of social and economic disadvantage. A disproportionate number suffer from mental illness, cognitive impairment or addiction to drugs or alcohol. Indigenous people are also seriously over-represented in prisons. The bishops' Statement challenges us to *'look for ways to support the most marginalised and include them in the community ... Being tough on crime will be wasteful, unjust and even counterproductive unless we are also tough on the factors that contribute to crime'* (p. 9)

What is being done to support vulnerable people in your parish, school or local community? What can your parish, school or local community do? Encourage the relevant politicians in your area to address this issue.

## **9. Include prisoners**

*Prisoners are still members of our community, including our Church community. They are behind bars, and cannot reach out* (Statement, p. 14).

We can reach out to prisoners and their families to maintain the spiritual support and practical concern and help. In our hearts, our homes and community, let us ask how we can foster a spirit of understanding towards those who have made wrong decisions in life and may even have done wrong to us.

As we gather to worship and celebrate the Eucharist, consider how we can provide a place at the table of the Lord for prisoners deprived of their liberty.



## **10. Learn and promote restorative justice**

Restorative justice gives priority to repairing harm done to relationships rather than to assigning blame and dispensing punishment. We can all apply restorative justice practices in our day to day lives – in schools, parish communities and families.

Here are five simple exercises:

### **When things go wrong**

- What happened?
- What were you thinking at the time?
- What have you thought about since?
- Who has been affected by what you have done? In what way?
- What do you think you need to do to make things right?

