

Prisoner Pen Pal Program

Diocese of Lansing

VOLUNTEER GUIDELINES

Spiritual encouragement
and support to prisoners
through letters.

“When I get a letter, it puts a smile on my face every time. I’m always looking forward to a letter. It makes my day while here in prison. It could be a gloomy day in here or just a bad day. But when mail comes and I see it’s from my pen pal, the light starts to shine.”

Inmate from a prison in Michigan

Prisoner Pen Pal Program
Restorative Justice Ministry
228 North Walnut St.
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OUR MISSION

We are attempting to provide spiritual and psychological support as well as friendship to men and women behind prison walls. We encourage our volunteers to include some spiritual direction/counsel/inspiration with each letter, as well as the thoughts of friendship.

THE MATCHING PROCESS

We are looking for volunteers who are at least 18 years of age and will see this ministry as an extension of their Christian commitment. Read these guidelines and fill out the attached application form. Upon receipt of your signed application, your name will be matched with an inmate from a prison in the Diocese of Lansing. You will receive a letter from us with your pen pal's name and number. You must start by writing the first letter. **Your first name only is given to the inmate.** Before inmates are allowed to write, we require them to read and sign guidelines which ask them to pray daily and to commit to conducting their correspondence as a Christian friend.

FORWARDING LETTERS

All letters, from both pen pals and prisoners, will be forwarded through the Restorative Justice Office where they will be closely monitored to ensure that the content is appropriate and safe before forwarding. **Only your first name is given to the prisoner.** We will forward your letter to your pen pal using our return address to ensure your privacy and safety.

MAIL YOUR LETTER TO:

(Prisoner's Name & Number), c/o Prisoner Pen Pal Program, Restorative Justice Ministry, 300 West Ottawa Street, Lansing, MI 48933

PRISON MAIL REGULATIONS

There are strict rules regarding what prisoners can receive through the mail in the prisons. Prisoners are not allowed to receive cash, packages, food or clothing from the outside. Cards must be of a single thickness of paper without layers or stickers. **Never put stickers on your letter or envelope. Do not send laminated prayer cards or laminated book marks.** Prisoners are only allowed to order books through an approved vendor that the prison designates. You are allowed to help your prisoner buy books through the approved vendors. You can cause your prisoner undue hardship by not following the rules of the prison. Contact the Restorative Justice Ministry Office to find out about the approved vendors before you send any books into the prison.

LEGAL ADVICE OR COUNSEL

We advise pen pals never to become involved in the legal matters of their prisoner's case. This includes writing letters to the parole board or attorneys. State from the beginning that this is a Christian friendship and all other matters must be taken to a lawyer or case worker.

VISITS AND PHONE CALLS

We do not allow you to visit your prisoner pen pal, or to receive phone calls from your prisoner. Do not give a prisoner your phone number. This ministry is meant to reach out to prisoners through letters ONLY.

A WORD OF CAUTION

Many prisoners are lonely and may seek romantic involvement with a female pen pal. We absolutely prohibit such behavior. We will intervene to end the pen pal relationship if this happens.

ENDING A PEN PAL RELATIONSHIP

You are free to end the pen pal relationship with your prisoner at any time. If for any reason you seek to end the relationship, please notify the Restorative Justice Ministry. We closely monitor the letter writing of each pen pal relationship and it is important for us to know when it has ended.

CAREFUL CONSIDERATION

As you can see from these guidelines, correspondence with an inmate is a ministry that should be undertaken only after careful, prayerful consideration requiring continuing care and mature discernment.

Nevertheless, our experience indicates that volunteers who follow these guidelines and who seek spiritual counsel as appropriate during the correspondence relationship will be richly rewarded.

DO:

- Write at least once a month.
- Use your first name only or a pseudonym on the envelope and in the letter.
- Include the prisoner's number after his name on the envelope to insure timely delivery of letters.
- Send all letters to the Restorative Justice Office.
- Be aware that your prisoner may have emotional ups and downs. Depression is common among prisoners and they sometimes stop writing for a while.
- Be aware of con games. Notify us if you feel manipulated in any way.
- If you feel uncomfortable with any aspect of the program, please contact the Restorative Justice Office.

DO NOT:

- Do not ask what their crime is. If he/she volunteers the information, know that he is doing so out of deep trust for you.
- Do not give legal advice regarding your prisoner's case.
- Do not agree to visit your prisoner or accept phone calls from him.
- Do not give your prisoner your address or phone number.

- Do not sign loans or pay an inmate's legal fees.
- Do not send photos.
- Do not give your prisoner other names and addresses to write to.

The Prisoner Pen Pal Program

is part of Restorative Justice Ministry Diocese of Lansing, Michigan.

As such, it is our hope that you will see yourself first and foremost as extending the love of Christ to the prisoners with whom you correspond. With each letter, we encourage you to share your faith and how God is working in your life and how He may have helped you in the past.

Daily prayer and reflection on the Scriptures are highly recommended. Include your pen pal in your prayers mindful that he/she may have burdens and obstacles we can hardly imagine.