

## COMING HOME FROM PRISON

“Another six months and I’m out of here” were the words one man recently shared in a letter to me. He followed that announcement with a lot of questions about housing, job possibilities, church, and the possible neighborhood response to his return. Most inmates don’t ask these kinds of questions but sex offenders do. And in faith, I think he expected that I would have answers for him.

No one can accurately predict every potential problem, and certainly no man can ever provide all the right answers. But there is always an element of truth when any of us on the outside makes an honest attempt to respond to this kind of letter.

I’d like to share with you my responses to some of those issues. If you are looking at a release date, maybe something I share will ring true for you. Possibly you might know someone else who might need this article, so pass it on.

When questions about being released are asked of me, I presume that the individual writing will be released on an appointed date and there will be no complications related to civil commitment hearings.

### **Preparations**

I was incredibly blessed because my wife had decided to stay with me and work through issues that we both suspected would surface. Under close scrutiny, I was allowed to come home to live. Our eldest child was in college and the two younger ones were in high school at the time. Were I being released today, I cannot say whether or not I would even have been allowed to come home. But back in 1988 I was.

Some inmates feel that the issue of home, job, church, and anything else considered important must be resolved before leaving prison. I’m not sure how one can do that. Preparations *are* important but flexibility with regard to the outcome of those preparations is equally important.

### **A Faith Community**

Throughout my time in prison, I considered the chapel and the programs offered there as critical to any personal restoration. Before I even met with the parole board, I wrote a letter to the church I attended on the streets letting the pastor know I might be granted a release. I shared the importance of faith in my daily life while also recognizing that my church family might not even want me as a member. I asked the pastor for his feelings about my return as well as any restrictions he might consider important to have in place.

His answer did not come right away and I wondered if my letter even made it into his hands. It had, and eventually he wrote his response. His wording was guarded and with a hint that I might be happier attending a different church where I could start over. While this was an option, I knew that reconciliation, if it were to happen, would not fare well if I was not available.

Had the pastor’s response been a definite “No, we would rather you not come back,” I would have accepted that and looked for another church. But I would have been no less up front with a new pastor because it would be that pastor’s responsibility to protect the children in the congregation.

[While not meant to provide for every situation, I wrote *The Church, The Sex Offender, and Reconciliation* (Regeneration Books) in order to help churches discuss this issue.]

I will add that some paroled offenders may not be allowed to attend *any* church without a collaborative plan in place that is agreeable to the probation or parole officer. And in some situations, this collaborative plan won’t even happen because an agent might not deem it practical given the risk of reoffending level assigned before release.

If church attendance is a questionable issue, show good faith and ask about small Bible study groups that you might attend or ask if someone in the church might serve as a mentor to you. I have learned from my own experience that coming back to the church formerly attended does not mean picking up where one left off. Trust must be earned and it will come slowly.

If you are uncertain about the specific church you'll want to attend but know the city you will live in, I suggest that you write to General Information, Chamber of Commerce, <City, State, Zipcode>. In the letter, mention you might be moving to the city and would like a list of churches with contact information. If you have a specific denomination in mind, limit your request to that denomination.

### **Housing and Jobs**

Without a doubt the most difficult thing for a sex offender to find is housing. The suggestion I make most often is that the best starting places for information are pastors of the church you will attend, prison Bible study leaders, Prison Fellowship, Salvation Army, and any other large agency with possible housing or job contacts. Close behind is the matter of finding a job. Employment that pays top dollar might not be found, but there are jobs that will get you by.

If I were you reading this, I might be tempted to say, "What good is what he shared? I have to know for sure where I'll be living in order to present my plan to the parole board." That might be true but it also might be equally true that faith will play a large part in this aspect of leaving prison. I *believe* that God meets our needs although His solutions don't always look like the answers we have been waiting for.

### **Sex Offender Registry**

I was on probation when the sex offender registry (SOR) went into effect. Initially, I thought that because my arrest occurred before the date the law went into effect, I would not be required to participate. My parole agent told me that the law applied to anyone in prison or on paper at the time, so I headed off to the police station and then the county sheriff's office to sign in.

The SOR is one area that is difficult to pin down because one state might interpret the law more restrictively than another state. Actually, the same can be said for differences that exist from city to city. The SOR is also somewhat subject to whatever way the legislative wind might be blowing. When I started, for example, I was told I would have to follow the rules for 15 years and then would no longer have to report. Only months later, new laws were adopted and I fell into a category requiring lifetime reporting.

Before I say anything else, I have chosen to view the SOR as an agency of authority. Scripture states: "<sup>1</sup>Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God." (Romans 13.1 NIV)

Some men have shared with me that the SOR just isn't fair. Men guilty of other crimes do not have to be registered; they don't see their names on the Internet; and they are able to get jobs not open to a sex offender. I cannot argue whether or not the SOR is fair—all I can do is argue that it exists and sex offenders have no choice in the matter. My victims would certainly come back with "It wasn't fair what you did to us, either."

I cannot speak for other states but I can tell you that I have not felt my state looking over my shoulder at every turn. They are not hoping that I relapse and reoffend just so someone can say, "I told you so." I believe they want me to succeed because success means no new victims.

### **Neighborhood Notification**

It is not true that every sex offender being released has his or her picture in the local paper or on TV. It is not true that every home housing a sex offender is picketed or that threats of violence are made against offenders. It *is* true that people wanting to know if there is an offender living in their neighborhood can find out. But it is not true that everyone in a community goes on the Internet at night just to see if an offender has recently moved into town.

My neighborhood is not the same as it was before I was arrested. My neighbors are not antisocial but neither do they go out of their way to be as friendly as they once were. I avoid any conversation with the children living nearby and know that their parents have told them to come in if I am working in the yard. These parents are doing what parents are supposed to do—protecting their children. I can say I will never molest one of their children, but I did molest years ago so my word only counts for just so much to their way of thinking.

### **What's it like?**

Perhaps the one thing I didn't expect when I came home was that I would be making so many decisions. When I was inside someone told me when to get up, where to go, how long I could be somewhere. A host of other decisions made *for* me each and every day by someone else. I may have resented the orders and the apparent lack of freedom in making some of my own decisions, but I learned to follow those orders.

I didn't really realize to what extent I had grown accustomed to regimented living until I entered our local Goodwill store with the idea of buying some inexpensive jeans. The first hint of a problem came as I saw that the pants were not separated by size. There were a *lot* of pants, some with sizes inside the waist but most without that information. All were in disorganized piles.

Suddenly I felt a panic growing inside me. The next thing I knew I was pacing back and forth. My son asked me what was wrong, but I had no words to share with him. He literally took my arm and pulled me out of that store. We were halfway home before I realized what caused my panic. I had not expected such a lack of order, and I was unprepared to deal with it. Fortunately there was a tomorrow and that tomorrow saw me in a new pair of pants.

### **Friends**

It also took a while to accept the fact that not everyone I considered a friend before my arrest would be my friend when I came home from prison. As a matter of fact, I saw some friends look very uneasy when they thought I might come up to talk with them. Over the years a few relationships have been restored while others have not. The timing of such things is not mine to control.

The friends I am making now help me to be accountable. They pray for me and encourage me to be open to God's grace in all things. To tell you the truth, I like being honest and I really like not living the double life I led until I was arrested.

### **Some closing thoughts**

God does provide for my needs and is faithful in leading my heart into His will. Not all my wants are met—most of them aren't—but growing healthy is learning to understand what is important and what isn't.

Some men write with plans of ministry as soon as they are released. They want to start groups, write books, and speak out on issues related to child molestation. These are good things but they should not be the first order of business.

Things changed a lot in the short time I was in prison and I was out of touch with more than I knew when I came home. A good man told me that in my first year home I would need to get myself into a support group, build a strong church affiliation with good accountability, and develop healthy living habits. I believed that God would not withdraw opportunities to witness to others and He hasn't.

Going home is a great thing, but home did not become perfect in your absence. You still have a lot of life to live and tons of decisions to make before going to your eternal home. Trust in God. Serve Him in all ways. And accept that you are greatly loved in His eyes. It's that love that will make all the difference. Pray for me. I'll pray for you.