

THE EMPOWERMENT NETWORK

One Network, Three Communities



FACILITATORS COHORT

Participation is based on an understanding of the principles articulated in these foundational documents

Empowering
Disciplemakers
Affected by
Incarceration

Strengthening
The Indigenous
Church Inside
America's Prisons

Updated 9/19/25

Facilitator's Cohort
Strengthening The Indigenous Church Inside America's Prisons
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Who We Are: Purpose, Principles, Practice
Facilitator's Cohort
"Strengthening The Indigenous Church Inside America's Prisons"

Background

Even though Onesimus was a fugitive, the apostle Paul urged Philemon to receive Onesimus as someone who had become useful to the Kingdom of God. It took all three (Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus) to empower Onesimus for effective service. In the same way, The Empowerment Network is comprised of three communities who recognize the value of empowering disciplemakers in prison and after re-entry.

1. **Facilitators Cohort:** People who empower disciplemakers in prison for the strengthening of the indigenous church inside, by sharing ideas with other cohort members and producing new resources for the indigenous church.
2. **Alumni Association:** Graduates of formal in-prison disciplmaking programs of three years or more, such as TUMI's Capstone Curriculum and Prison Seminaries Foundation, who interact with each other on the outside for mutual support, networking, and Christian spiritual growth.
3. **Church Alliance:** Churches who have received basic training to welcome effective disciplemakers coming from prison to find their place of service in their church community, are listed in a public-facing national directory, and who share ideas with other Alliance churches.

Facilitators Cohort Vision: Grow a nationwide collaborative community including periodic meetings, a platform of accessible resources, and 50-state participation by 2029.

Facilitators Cohort Principles

1. America's prisoners live in a culture that is significantly different from the culture outside prison.
2. The indigenous prison Church is a legitimate expression of the Church in its cultural context.
3. The presence of bona-fide indigenous disciplemakers in America's prisons means it is no longer an unreached mission field.
4. The indigenous prison Church is a rich source for Kingdom workers inside prison, in the outside-Church, and for world missions.
5. A minimum of three years of formal Scripture engagement is a benchmark suggesting a prisoner has overcome criminal thinking, which is necessary to be an effective disciplemaker.
6. The outside-Church will always have a vital role to empower disciplemakers affected by incarceration, both inside prison and during re-entry.
7. An effective facilitator in the prison context recognizes that the responsibility to lead the church inside belongs to the indigenous church itself but the facilitator can provide inspiration and resources that support gifted prisoners to do ministry.

8. Effective facilitating is evident when indigenous disciplemakers minister from their gifting, using tools offered by their facilitators, to disciple others, with a desire to see people impacted by the Gospel beyond their prison context.
9. While the formerly incarcerated should start serving in a local church immediately upon release, a minimum of 12 months of observation in free-world culture is necessary to demonstrate authentic sanctification.
10. The indigenous prison Church has limited ability to collaborate with indigenous disciplemakers in other prisons, but the Cohort can assist in a nationwide indigenous prison movement.

Practice

Participants agree with historic Christian faith, recognizing the Cohort is comprised of people employing diverse methods and strategies. Therefore, no one is required to endorse the work of other participants, but all public communication is expected to be edifying. Any information listed on platforms is expected to be kept current and inquiries should receive prompt replies, preferably within five business days.

Prison Ministry as Cross-Cultural Mission, Mark Walker (May 2023)

Summarized by Don Allsman

Watch the full presentation at <https://vimeo.com/1005998332>

Main idea: Prison ministry is a cross-cultural ministry in the same way that historic overseas missions is cross-cultural. Understanding this reality will improve the effectiveness of those doing incarceration ministry.

America's prisoners live in a culture that is significantly different from the culture outside prison.

Culture can be understood as “the characteristics by which people order their lives, interpret the world around them, evaluate behavior, and the things that it considers important.” For example, some cultures value being on time, but other cultures are event-oriented.

The culture in prison is significantly different from the culture outside of prison, and in some ways is similar to a Middle Eastern or Southeast Asian culture. For example, outside culture is based on guilt/innocence, evaluating behavior in terms of right and wrong or whether someone is innocent or guilty. However, prison is based on shame/honor, which evaluates people and behaviors in terms of whether their words or actions bring honor or shame to an individual (or the group to which they belong). In prison, this is often talked about in terms of respect and disrespect. Disrespect causes shame, and in order to regain respect, a prisoner is culturally required to retaliate against the person who disrespected them.

Also, outside culture is egalitarian and interdependent, called low-power distance. Prison culture is based on high-power distance, where there is a clear hierarchy, especially in gangs. Prisoners are expected to follow orders without questioning people in power. There's a high degree of respect for older people in the prison culture, whereas outside culture values youth over age.

Prison culture is a collectivist culture, i.e. fitting in with a group, whether a gang or an ethnic group. Also, prisoners represent a group rather than themselves as individuals. For example, in prison, conversion is sometimes described as a change in “who the prisoner represents.” Conversely, outside culture tends to be individualistic. Also, prisoners are forced to live around one another 24 hours a day, seven days a week, making it difficult to hide one's behaviors from the group. But on the outside, it is easy to carry on a pretense when people see each other at church only once or twice a week for a few minutes at a time.

The indigenous prison Church is equipped to evangelize and disciple in their prison context. The process of communicating God's truth in a culture is called “contextualization.” Jesus contextualized for Jewish people in the first century, and Paul contextualized for the Gentiles. Missionaries have contextualized the Gospel in unreached cultures until their local believers

could lead the church because people from the outside will not be as effective communicating the truths of scripture as those living inside the culture. Consequently, contextualization doesn't require the missionary coming in from the outside to shape and steer the process when there are local Christians who are indigenous to that culture.

In like manner, indigenous leadership in prison culture should be encouraged to govern themselves, not be governed from a distance by foreign churches outside the culture. The indigenous Church can also reproduce without dependence from outside churches because indigenous leaders are best positioned to effectively contextualize the gospel. So the best use of energy for incarceration ministry is to develop indigenous disciplers.

When indigenous leadership is equipped, it allows ministry to continue during times like COVID, when everything was locked down from the outside. Even though there were no programs and no chapels, the life of the Church continued because they had leaders who continued to disciple people. They developed their own discipleship program in their church. It was entirely their design and their initiative.

There will always be important ways for the Church-outside to empower the indigenous church.

Because of the physical limitations of incarceration, the indigenous prison Church has is unable to freely collaborate with indigenous leaders in other prisons. But the Church-outside can help build a nationwide indigenous prison movement by sharing ideas among other prison ministries, and also bringing new ideas in from the outside. In this way, prison ministers can be catalysts and facilitators rather than evangelists and disciplers.

Another important role for the Church-outside is to bring in leadership training to the prison. This can be in the form of seminaries like World Impact's *Capstone Curriculum* or *Prison Seminaries Foundation*. These programs recognize the centrality of pre-existing prison-led churches with indigenous leaders but recognize that these leaders can benefit from additional training and resources (e.g. commentaries, books on theology, biblical studies, language tools).

The process of re-entry from inside to outside culture is difficult.

When prisoners are released, they experience what missiologists call "reentry shock." This happens to people who spend a lot of time overseas, then return home expecting it to feel normal, and find it is not normal. It's a second-culture shock that is experienced when a person who has become accustomed to a new culture has to readjust back to their old culture. Returning citizens experience this on top of the stress of finding a job, housing, and

reconnecting with family and friends. It can take 12-18 months before this cultural transition is complete.

This is related to the idea in missions called “a third culture kid,” when missionaries take young children to another culture. When they come back to their original culture, it feels strange. And they never really fully become reincorporated in their own culture, so now they're half in one culture and half in another. They have their foot in both worlds and never really feel entirely at home in either one. This is how some prisoners feel when they return to society. Therefore, the church-outside can be trained to come alongside former prisoners to make this transition easier.¹

Another role for the outside church is to create a house church that is specifically designed to be comfortable for those coming out of prison culture. For some, it is easier to step into a community of welcoming people who can all talk about what it was like in prison. This kind of church also creates opportunities for people who were leaders in prison to step into service more quickly than might be the case in other traditional churches, such as teaching, music, or hospitality.

The indigenous Church in prison is a rich source for Kingdom workers.

God loves to work through the least of these, the weak, the marginalized, the despised, and rejected. And God is growing the Church inside, which is impacting the yards and also affecting family members. They are effectively leading Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and satanists to Christ.

Those who are released to the free world, once they are helped in their 12-18 month transition during cultural re-entry, can be valuable church members, bringing skills and vitality that the church-outside needs. As more refugees and immigrants are coming to America's cities, these formerly-incarcerated disciplinarians can help a local church minister to the diaspora.

Not only that, but many people in prison will get deported to another country to spread the Gospel as a missionary or church planter. Therefore, the outside-Church can play a great role in promoting, catalyzing, encouraging and empowering prisoners to do the work of the Great Commission in prison, on the outside, and around the world.

Great Commission Recruitment from the Incarcerated

Don and Cathy Allsman

Completion Global, Inc. seeks to accelerate innovation for the Great Commission. We want to help the Church make disciples and plant indigenously-led, reproducing churches among every tribe, people, language, and nation (Rev. 7:9). We desire more than just the establishment of a single, growing church and prefer to see churches that are intentional about reproducing new churches every few years. For example, we would rather help one church of 50-75 people plant five new churches of 100 than see one church of 500. Our dream is to see churches develop new leaders and new church plants every 3-5 years, spreading exponentially within each of the world's people groups.

Part of this dream is to make the world missions community aware of the tremendous opportunity to recruit effective cross-cultural workers for the harvest from America's prisons. We have seen the amazing fruit produced by the incarcerated when they have received credible biblical training and responded obediently to the Holy Spirit. As gifted ministers of the Gospel, they are effective witnesses to Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Satanists, and tribal peoples.

Mobilizing them for world missions is an important way to energize the Church to complete Jesus' task to preach the Kingdom to all ethnic groups (Mt. 24:14), represented by the 1600 remaining unengaged people groups on earth. Agencies engaging the unreached will benefit from recruiting in America's prisons.

For us to have credibility in recommending bona fide candidates to world missions agencies, we endorse former prisoners with an earned certificate from a formal Christian discipling program that meets these four conditions:

- Recognize the legitimacy of the indigenous prison church;
- Train disciplers in prison to grow in their service to the indigenous church;
- Offer at least three years of scripture engagement to overcome criminal thinking;
- Prepare disciplers for service in free-world churches if they are released.

Beyond Discipleship

There are several effective discipleship programs in the prison context, but very few are designed to go beyond basic discipleship and meet these four conditions. In this document, we will refer most often to the program with which we have the most experience, *The Capstone Curriculum*, developed by Dr. Don Davis from World Impact and The Urban Ministry Institute (<https://worldimpact.org/get-trained/church-based-seminary/>) This four-year program has been employed since 2003 by several prison ministries in many states, producing thousands of disciplers inside and outside of prisons. Another good nationwide program is Prison Seminaries Foundation, started by Burl Cain (<https://www.prisonseminaries.org/>).

Conformance to the Design

While these programs offer great potential for equipping people to make disciples, the quality of each prison program is enhanced by the ability of the person delivering the training. For example, after visiting dozens of Capstone prison classes in several states, we have observed a disparity in the quality of the discipling development when facilitators deviate from The Capstone Curriculum's design. Therefore, conformance to the program's principles is essential for cultivating effective indigenous church disciplers.

Preparation for Release

The culture of prison is radically different from free-world culture. Being released from prison is as much of an adjustment as a Peruvian would face moving to Vietnam. Prisoners can be truly transformed during incarceration, and even be legitimate Christian disciplers in their context, but until their sanctification is tested in free-world culture for 12-18 months, they are especially vulnerable to recidivism. While it is vital for returning citizens to be given church ministry opportunities upon release, it is dangerous to give them too much responsibility during their time of adjustment. Therefore, effective programs build a strong foundation in prison but also prepare people for a difficult transition to outside culture.

Six Essential Elements for Success

Successful programs in the prison context reflect the following six principles. To whatever extent there is non-compliance, or "cutting corners" with any of these six, we have observed that their effectiveness is greatly diminished. In some cases the program has become little more than a rigorous Bible study.

1. **Facilitating (vs. teaching):** Indigenous disciplers are best developed when the facilitator allows the prisoners to engage in the material and discuss it with one another. The best facilitators are those who ask good questions that challenge their proteges to rightly divide the Word. The least effective developers are those who preach and teach too much. Good programs are not "just add water" Bible studies, but require the wise guidance of an experienced follower of Christ. For example, over the course of 16 Capstone modules, a good facilitator will delegate an increasing workload to the prisoners to lead and, like John the Baptist, become less and less visible. This also teaches prisoners to become effective developers for others in the prison church.
2. **Selective admission (vs. broad admission):** A solid program develops people who have already demonstrated their ability to make disciples. It works best for those who want to become better disciplers. When a broad admission policy is employed, the program can be poisoned by unmotivated students. While legal restrictions exist regarding admission, there are creative ways to comply while maintaining program integrity. For example, other programs can be offered to the general population or new believers (e.g. Fight the Good Fight of Faith, developed by Dr. Davis), which can be a pre-requisite to Capstone admission. An approach like this is better than diluting The Capstone program.
3. **Three-year program length (vs. truncated exposure):** Research shows that prisoners are institutionalized within a few months of incarceration, resulting in criminal thinking to

survive. If they have not experienced trauma before prison, they experience it shortly into their sentence. For criminal thinking to be reversed, there must be a sustained length of time marinating in the Scriptures. Since Jesus took three years to teach the apostles how to carry on His ministry, it makes sense that prisoners would also need a minimum of sustained exposure to Christian discipling development. For example, after completing the first 1.5 Capstone modules, we have observed that prisoners' behavior actually gets *worse* (because of pride). Then, after about one year they start to become humbler, and after three years there was another inflection point, where the program was no longer about their achievement, but their equipping as Kingdom servants. At completion of 16 modules over four years, we consistently witnessed a confident humility as servants for Christ. When this is truncated to under three years, a positive foundation can be laid, but healthy disciplers will not be developed in prison until more Scripture engagement is completed. Therefore, a minimum of three years is critical for developing credible disciplers.

4. **Cohort experience (vs. independent study):** One of Dr. Davis' genius design components was to insist on learning in a cohort, just as the apostles did with Jesus. They learned how to be Kingdom servants by walking together from town to town, by reviewing the day around the fire at night, and having debates that Jesus helped them process. Prisoners also need these kinds of experiences. They also need one another for encouragement. At nearly every one of the 40+ graduations we have attended, we have heard the students say, "I would have given up long ago if not for my fellow students." For many prisoners, the completion of Capstone has been the first thing they ever completed, and having done it in a cohort made the experience more formational than an individual achievement.
5. **Systematic theology (vs. inductive Bible study):** Christians need the framework of the Kingdom Story to properly disciple people and train others. Churches need to be protected against heresy, which is best done by defending the apostolic tradition that Capstone teaches. Those who simply teach Bible studies or disconnected theological topics without a point of single integration will inevitably run into problems, as we know from Church history.
6. **Visionary future (vs. low expectations):** Because prisoners can have a low view of their abilities, they can despair about their future on the outside. Disciplers are developed by the high expectations of their facilitators, providing a vision for the future. Mentors who have low expectations, and who simply try to produce good citizens, will not develop effective disciplers. If the Capstone Curriculum is used just to keep men and women from recidivism, it will not produce an identity of the kind of courage and boldness that Kingdom servants need.

In summary, prisoners have the best chance to become effective disciplers when they have a mentor with high expectations, who facilitates a cohort of selected students in tight conformance with the program's design, and includes at least three years of sustained engagement in the Word. By contrast, when a lecturer with low expectations follows the program's elements selectively, and offers it to the general population for less than three years,

it is less likely to result in people who can reproduce their life in Christ in a healthy way. Therefore, we are eager to help ministries start effective discipling programs in additional prisons who follow the four conditions while we also encourage missions agencies consider recruitment of bona fide indigenous workers from the prison context.

Facilitator Profile

Mark Walker and Don Allsman

Summary

The traditional view of U.S. prison ministry is rooted in what the outsider does FOR the prisoner (or formerly incarcerated). By contrast, we believe the best role for an outsider is to develop indigenous leaders within existing prison churches. We propose that empowering indigenous leaders is the most biblical, enduring, and impactful approach to prison ministry.² In this context an effective Facilitator disciples, mentors, or supports God-gifted prisoners for Christian ministry, based on the Facilitator's: 1) Comprehension of prison culture in the U.S.; 2) Passion to apply principles of cross-cultural missions and ministry practice; 3) Vision to develop indigenous leaders.

Skills

1. **Shifts Responsibility:** A Facilitator actively and intentionally works to shift primary responsibility for the work of Christian theology, ministry, and practice from outside ministries to gifted leaders within the prison churches themselves. They look to promote, catalyze, encourage and empower Christians to contextualize the gospel in their local context.³
2. **Provides Resources:** A Facilitator is a resource connector who recognizes the unique limitations on ministry resources created by the prison environment and creates access to resources that will improve indigenous ministers' competence, effectiveness, and scope of influence. They provide resources outside of the local community that may be helpful in the process of contextualization such as commentaries, theological works, biblical scholars, original Bible languages and anthropological studies.⁴
3. **Inspires Action:** A Facilitator encourages gifted prisoners to take up the mantle of ministry responsibility, mentors those prisoners through ministry experiences, and respects their theological conclusions and ministry approaches even when there is disagreement over non-essentials. An effective Facilitator "enables or empowers local Christians to make good decisions in light of the particular challenges they face. The facilitator is more concerned with equipping Christians to discover their own methods and means rather than identifying them or pointing them out. They anticipate that prisoners will want to lead, and they find helpful ways to ensure that this happens."⁵

Outcomes

The evidence of effective Facilitating can be observed when competent leaders within the prison churches are: (1) ministering according to their own spiritual gifting for building up the Body of Christ; (2) developing themselves as using the tools and resources provided by the Facilitator; (3) discipling new leaders within the prison churches and (4) desiring to see their ministry impact people beyond prison and into the wider Church and community.

Statement of Faith

The Nicene Creed predates theological and denominational divisions and so represents an excellent basis for understanding historic orthodox Christian faith.

We believe in one God, The Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible. We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Begotten Son of God, Begotten of the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God, Begotten not created, of the same essence as the Father, through whom all things were made. Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary and became human. Who for us too, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, suffered and was buried. The third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his Kingdom will have no end. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and life-giver, Who proceeds from the Father and the Son. Who together with the Father and Son is worshiped and glorified. Who spoke by the prophets. We believe in one holy, catholic⁶, and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sin, and we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come.

Endnotes

¹ There are three instructional video available from Completion Global to help in this regard: <https://vimeo.com/1030884697>; <https://vimeo.com/1032482819>; <https://vimeo.com/1032521279>

² Mark Walker, *Prison Ministry as Cross-Cultural Mission*, <https://vimeo.com/831975408/8fcf4152df>.

³ Frank Tucker, *Intercultural Communication for Christian Ministry* (Adelaide, Australia: Frank Tucker, 2013), 340–41.

⁴ Tucker, *Intercultural Communication for Christian Ministry*, 340–41.

⁵ A. Scott Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2012), 196–216.

⁶ The word catholic refers to the sense of being universal, not any one tradition, e.g. Roman Catholic.

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