

Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses



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September 8, 2011

TO ALL BODIES OF ELDERS

Re: Prison witnessing

Dear Brothers:

This letter replaces the letter dated August 9, 2010, to all bodies of elders regarding prison witnessing. The subheading on judicial meetings with incarcerated individuals has been deleted since sufficient information is contained in the *Shepherding* textbook, chapter 6, paragraph 15. Paragraph 15 of this letter contains direction on hour credit for pioneers participating in the prison ministry. Paragraph 17 contains further direction on limitations involving prisoners who have abused children.

A number of congregations are sharing in a unique avenue of sacred service that involves witnessing in prisons. It is commendable that such congregations have expanded their witnessing efforts to include penal institutions located within their territory boundaries. Methods of gaining access to inmates who have requested spiritual assistance vary according to the regulations at a given facility. Gaining access may require becoming approved by the facility to serve as a religious volunteer or a religious advisor. Witnessing to incarcerated persons housed at these facilities is challenging, but at the same time, it can be rewarding. A number of our brothers have had success in helping male prisoners and sisters have helped female prisoners to become active servants of Jehovah. To assist those carrying out this aspect of the ministry, we are pleased to offer the following guidelines. We recommend that appropriate portions of this material be reviewed with all publishers who are presently or who in the future become involved in prison witnessing.

Contact congregation: A contact congregation is a congregation that the branch office has assigned to be responsible for the work in one or more facilities. We prefer to assign correctional facilities to the congregation that holds the territory where the facilities are located. When this is not possible, a neighbouring congregation can serve in this capacity. Additionally, in facilities where more than one language is spoken, the branch office will seek to assign contact congregations that speak those languages.

The responsibilities of the contact congregation involve following up on the interest at the facility. The service overseer should take the lead in coordinating the witnessing. He can delegate various tasks to qualified brothers who are approved by the body of elders. Handling correspondence with the branch office regarding work at the facility should be done through the congregation secretary. Anyone taking part in prison witnessing should do so under the direction of the contact congregation. Publishers from neighbouring congregations who qualify to assist are encouraged to make themselves available. Those who are able to assist must be approved by their Congregation Service Committee.

If a congregation is unable to continue to serve as the contact congregation, the branch office should be informed of the reason in writing. In cases where the brothers know of another congregation that is willing to serve in their place, the existing contact congregation should write to the branch office to recommend the change. The service committees of

both congregations should sign the letter. The branch office will indicate in writing whether or not the recommendation is approved.

Dealing with prison officials: A pleasant, persistent approach is often successful. Endeavour to keep all appointments with inmates and officials. Adhere to the rules and regulations of the institution. When a certificate of verification of ordination as a minister is required, the congregation should write a professional-looking letter using the congregation's letterhead. The letter should clearly identify the individual as an ordained minister of the congregation for the appropriate number of years, state the date of his or her ordination (baptism), and be signed by the Congregation Service Committee. If such a letter is not accepted by a facility, then the congregation may write to the branch office for further direction. Please include a copy of the letter that has been rejected.

Referrals and personal contact with inmates: When the contact congregation receives a referral from the branch office, it should be followed up on as promptly as possible. You may be able to offer spiritual assistance by providing literature items and regular magazine delivery, and by assigning qualified publishers to visit regularly and, if possible, conduct one-on-one or group studies at the facility. If personal contact is not possible, perhaps a qualified publisher could be assigned to correspond with a detainee. Follow closely the direction found in the April 2003 *Our Kingdom Ministry* Question Box: "It is strongly recommended that sisters not write to male prisoners, even if it is with the goal of giving spiritual help. That responsibility should be handled only by qualified brothers. Qualified sisters may be assigned to correspond with female inmates who express sincere interest in Bible truth." Congregations and individual publishers should never use the return address of the branch office on any personal correspondence with inmates. Please see the announcement in the August 2005 *Our Kingdom Ministry*.

Literature requests and distribution: Individual publishers should not write to the branch office to request that literature items be sent to an inmate. Such third-party literature requests will not be honoured. Rather, an inmate should first endeavour to obtain basic Bible study material through the Witnesses who visit the facility. If this is not possible, he may write to the branch office with his literature request. The body of elders of the contact congregation may also write on his behalf. Disfellowshipped inmates may obtain single copies of our literature for personal use as outlined in this paragraph.

When possible, we prefer that the local congregation either supply magazines and literature directly to the confined person or arrange for it to be given to him by the designated official or chaplain. It is not necessary for congregations to undertake an extensive mailing operation to supply a detainee with magazines or other literature items. If our literature is allowed in the prison or chapel library and you cannot supply it yourself, then you may request in writing that it be supplied by the branch office. Please provide the first and last name of the facility official to whom the items should be sent.

When a facility permits local publishers to deliver literature to inmates in the facility, the congregation should request it as part of the regular monthly congregation literature request. However, some facilities do not permit inmates to possess hardbound literature or audio-cassettes that do not have clear shells. When this is the case, the contact congregation (not necessarily the language-coordinating congregation in the Kingdom Hall) should request specially prepared items from the branch office. Send a *Literature Request Form* (S-14) directly to the branch office. Your request can be submitted at any time during the month.

Only basic literature should be provided initially. This includes the *New World Translation*, magazines, brochures, and basic study books. Special-request items should generally be provided only for baptized publishers, unbaptized publishers, and those who are progressing well in their studies. In such cases, the elders of the contact congregation will request these items. Special consideration can be given to those who suffer from impaired vision or when there are other extenuating circumstances. Disfellowshipped individuals are allowed to receive special-request items at the discretion of the body of elders. *Organized to Do Jehovah's Will* should be provided only for those who qualify to engage in the field ministry as baptized or unbaptized publishers. *Our Kingdom Ministry* can be sent directly to qualified confined persons from the branch office if it cannot be provided locally. (*km* 2/87 p. 8) Please write to the branch office to arrange for this.

All of our videos are approved for use in the prison environment with the exception of *Jehovah's Witnesses—The Organization Behind the Name*, *The New World Society in Action*, and the broadcast, classroom, and press conference editions of *Jehovah's Witnesses Stand Firm Against Nazi Assault*. Requests for any of the other videos should be made by including them on your regular monthly literature request. Also, if facility officials require it, the branch office will supply a letter authorizing showings of our videos in a particular facility. If it is necessary to request such a letter, you may write to the branch office.

Correspondence with the branch office: In letters to the branch office regarding inmates or prison witnessing, please provide the complete name and address of the penal institution, and include the inmate's name and, when known, his identification number. If you are responding to or writing about a letter you have received from the branch office, please refer to the letter by desk symbol and date. The branch office depends on information from the contact congregation on the status of inmates and the extent of the work being done at facilities. Therefore, please respond to requests for information by the date specified. If you cannot provide complete answers to enquiries from the branch office by the date requested, please provide an update in writing on your progress in obtaining the information.

Reporting activity in the prison ministry: Literature placements made and Bible studies conducted in the prison environment should be reported by publishers to their respective congregations in the usual manner. Even if many attend a Bible study being held in the prison, one study is counted for the month and one return visit is counted each time the study is conducted. Confined unbaptized or baptized publishers should be counted as publishers in the contact congregation. Therefore, their field service reports should also be included in the congregation report. Additionally, when an inmate is transferred and it is known to which facility he has been sent, the *Congregation's Publisher Record* (S-21) card and a letter of introduction should be sent to the contact congregation caring for that facility. Notification of baptisms performed in prison should be submitted in writing to the branch office if they have not been included in the report for a circuit assembly or special assembly day.

Hour credit: While field service time should not be counted for conducting or participating in congregation meetings held in prison, pioneers are allowed to report hour credit for such activity. Time spent in the prison ministry other than that reported as field service time should be noted on the back of the *Field Service Report* (S-4). In posting the pioneer's *Congregation's Publisher Record* (S-21) card, the congregation secretary should note in the box where hours spent in field service are normally posted only the actual hours spent by the pioneer in field service. Time spent conducting or participating in congregation meetings held in prison should not be included with field service hours. Rather, such time can be noted in the "Remarks" column on the *Congregation's Publisher Record* card. How much credit can a

pioneer receive for sharing in such activity? The total number of hours actually spent in field service plus time spent conducting and participating in congregation meetings held in prison cannot exceed the monthly goal of 70 hours. No credit will be carried over to any other month. This follows the pattern of other activities for which pioneers may receive hour credit, such as for working with the Regional Building Committee. At times, elders participating in the prison ministry may report low field service activity for a certain month. If such ones are not regular pioneers, they do not receive a specific hour credit. However, it would be helpful for such ones to include on the back of their *Field Service Report* a brief note describing the additional responsibilities they cared for that month. No actual hour amount need be included. The secretary should make a note of this brief description in the “Remarks” column of the *Congregation’s Publisher Record* card.

Conducting meetings: Extensions of regular congregation meetings can be established when at least one baptized or unbaptized publisher will attend regularly. The attendance should be included with the contact congregation’s meeting attendance. The manner in which meetings are conducted in prisons must, as closely as possible, mirror the manner in which meetings are conducted at the Kingdom Hall. Disfellowshipped individuals should be treated the same as they would be at the congregation meetings at the Kingdom Hall.

Qualified brothers should conduct the meetings, preferably elders and ministerial servants either from the contact congregation or from a neighbouring congregation that is assisting the contact congregation. On occasion, if necessary, exemplary baptized inmates who would qualify for appointment in the congregation if they were not in prison may substitute for the appointed brothers from the contact congregation. One who has abused a child should not be used to conduct any meetings held in prison. If a baptized visiting brother or an exemplary baptized inmate is not available, the inmates should consider the material as a group. —See subheading “Reporting accusations of child abuse.”

Memorial attendance figures should be added to the total congregation count if the Memorial is held under the auspices of the congregation. The Memorial should be held after sundown on the date designated for the observance. Every effort should be made to arrange for an elder from the contact congregation or a neighbouring congregation to conduct this most important meeting of the year. If a representative from the contact congregation is not available, an exemplary baptized inmate could be assigned by the congregation to give the talk or the inmates could personally review the current issue of *The Watchtower* that discusses the Memorial arrangement.

Some facilities allow for an annual, or even semi-annual, meeting at which the inmates are able to meet together for a longer period of time than is usual. This could be a fine opportunity for baptisms, reviews of assembly and convention programmes, and so forth. Such extended meetings should *not* include arrangements in which congregation publishers, especially members of the opposite sex, are able to mingle freely with the prisoners. It may be that inmates are allowed to invite family members to attend an event. However, experience has shown that it is best for those of the opposite sex, even though related to prisoners, not to be invited to such meetings. Rather, invitations should be extended only to those who will share in the programme, regular volunteers with the prison programme, and possibly a few responsible, experienced ones who would be able to encourage and shepherd the inmates so that an excellent witness is given. Elders in the circuit or from nearby congregations who have presented assembly or convention parts could be invited to present this information along with the parts presented by the local elders. The invitation process should be closely

monitored by the elders responsible for caring for the prison witnessing. These extended meetings should not be called “special assembly days.”

Inmates serving in an appointed capacity: It has been the long-established policy that inmates would not be appointed as elders or ministerial servants. (1 Tim. 3:2, 7, 10; Titus 1:6, 7) However, some have been appointed as auxiliary pioneers or regular pioneers while in prison. While such individuals who were appointed in the past will not be deleted as pioneers, no further appointments of inmates as auxiliary pioneers or regular pioneers will be made. Of course, if an elder, a ministerial servant, or a pioneer is imprisoned for maintaining his Christian neutrality or for participating in the Christian ministry, the body of elders may determine that he can continue serving in an appointed capacity while imprisoned.

Reporting accusations of child abuse: Two elders should call the Legal Department regarding any prison inmate who has been accused of child abuse in the past and who is now associating with a congregation, for example, by attending congregation meetings held in prison. This would apply whether he is baptized or not. In some cases elders may not be authorized to enquire of the offence that an inmate may have committed. But if the elders learn that the alleged offence has to do with child abuse, they should call the Legal Department immediately. If a known child molester is in prison and is transferred to another facility or is released, it is important to inform the appropriate congregation of his situation in writing, if it is possible to do so.—*ks10* chap. 12 par. 20.

Other institutions: Aside from prisons, you may have in your territory state hospitals or substance-abuse facilities where access to the general public is not allowed. It may be that the principles outlined above in connection with witnessing to prisoners can be applied in such situations.

Keeping the branch office updated: Use the *Prison Information* (S-68) form to communicate information regarding facilities for which you are serving as the contact congregation if two or more years have elapsed since you last submitted such a form. When changes take place in the circumstances surrounding the work being done at a facility, please use this form to update the branch office as soon as possible. If your congregation is witnessing in a facility with several different yards or units, please submit a separate form for each individual unit. This is necessary because regulations often differ from unit to unit. Additional copies of the form may be downloaded from the jw.org website.

May Jehovah richly bless your efforts in this special field of service.

Your brothers,
*Christian Congregation
of Jehovah's Witnesses*

cc: Travelling overseers

PS to the secretary:

This letter should be retained in the congregation permanent file of policy letters. You may wish to update the congregation copy of *Index to Letters—For Bodies of Elders* (S-22) at this time as well.