

Review your answers in this booklet and write down, on the next page, the first steps you believe you need to take.

SAMPLE LETTER:

Giving institutional program directors an overview of the proposed Bible discussion group

Date

Name

Address

Dear-----,

Thank you for speaking with me the other day. I wanted to follow up our conversation by outlining a program that has helped juvenile justice facilities in several states meet their needs and requirements for religious programming.

Our program involves volunteer-led Bible discussion groups, facilitated by trained leaders from the local community. Our ministry trains volunteers as follows: [add an outline of your training regimen or, if you are doing this on your own, put in your own qualifications]. Similar Bible discussion groups have been organized in other states and have been successfully assisting youth in their spiritual development since 1987.

The Bible discussion groups are always voluntarily attended, are non-denominational, and are not associated with any church. The discussions are topical, covering areas such as friendship, habits, hurts, drugs and alcohol, love, self-image, hope, etc., and use the Bible as a guide.

We begin with an open discussion on an issue, and then read a story that relates to the topic of discussion. We continue the time together by discussing what the Bible says about the topic, and how God and our faith can help us deal with the issue. Each person attending the group is encouraged to express his or her views on the topic. Similar discussion groups are being held in more than 200 facilities in over 10 states, with an average of 40% of the residents of each facility voluntarily attending the programs.

I would appreciate an opportunity to discuss this further with you. Please contact me at your convenience at [your number and email address]. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Name

Title

A WAY IN: HOW TO START A BIBLE DISCUSSION GROUP

Thank you for your interest in Straight Ahead Ministries and how to start a Bible discussion group in a juvenile detention facility. This booklet will help you better understand what it takes, give an overview of the process, and provide a list of available resources to help you.

PREPARATION

The best place to start is in prayer, both for yourself as well as for those you hope to recruit. Often, following a Straight Ahead Ministries presentation to a church or other interested group, people who would like to become involved in working with at-risk kids deluge us. We take their names and addresses and tell them to pray about the Lord's leading; we send them volunteer application packets and literature; and often we don't hear from most people again.

But those we do hear from are those who have prayed that God would use them and who have heard his calling. Although we ask for a one-year commitment from our volunteers, over 80 percent stay longer — some more than 20 years at the same facility!

Write down the names of three people you will ask to pray for your ministry before you take any next steps:

WHAT IT TAKES

What does it take to lead a Bible discussion group with locked up teens? Maybe not what you think!

A heart for God – Luke 10:27: Jesus answered: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind;" and "Love your neighbor as yourself."

A heart for teens in trouble – Mark 2:17: On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."



Being real – Hebrews 13:8: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” Just as we can trust God to always be the same and keep all his promises, we must strive to be consistent in our words and actions.

Being available – Hebrews 13:3 “Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.” Matthew 25:36,40 “I was in prison and you came to visit me... The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’”

Is this you?

Write a sentence describing, as if for a job interview, how your qualifications for the “job” match these four characteristics:



EXAMINE YOUR MOTIVES

Next, you need to look inward a bit more and a good question to ask yourself is: “Why do I want to start a Bible discussion group?” If it’s because you’re seeking fulfillment in your life, that’s not a bad reason. Unfortunately, when the first young person you have befriended has a bad day or turns on you, you will feel empty and want to leave.

If it’s because you want to help young people succeed and want to bring them the Gospel, that’s a good reason, too, but not good enough. While things may be going along well and a young person who has made a commitment to the Lord may be doing great, what happens when they get out and get in trouble again? Will you be so disappointed that you were not able to make a difference in the teen’s life that you will get discouraged? That’s often what happens when our motivation is mostly to make a difference.

If, however, you want to start a Bible discussion group because the Lord is calling you and you realize it’s his Spirit that draws hurting kids, and his Gospel that transforms, then you have the right leading. He will work through you, keep you going through the tough times that will come, and bless you with new opportunities.

that the facility will let you stay longer each week, or that you will be able to participate in games or activities. Also, introduce yourself to all of the staff and make note of the supervisor’s name. This is the person to go to if you have any questions or problems and to contact if you cannot make it on a particular date.

GETTING STARTED

There are almost as many ways to lead Bible discussion groups as there are volunteers to lead them. Straight Ahead Ministries has created a two-volume set of studies by topic, as well as a series of booklets designed specifically for juveniles to work on individually. These are available through Straight Ahead and have a more in-depth discussion on leading an effective group. You can also utilize resources from local Christian bookstores and from your own Bible studies. In general, keep the studies topical, covering such areas as friendships, habits, hurts, anger, worry and decision-making. Use stories, games, videos, or anything else that will bring the Gospel to the young people to whom you will be ministering.

Begin the study by introducing yourself and have the young people introduce themselves. Tell them how glad you are that they came to the study. That small encouragement is empowering. Next, open up with a short prayer. This will set the tone for the study. Then set out some basic rules, like one person speaking at a time, respecting one another, etc. Start with open discussion on the topic, then bring in Scriptural references that illustrate a main point. Wrap up by discussing what God might have to say about the topic, and explain ways God can help us deal with that area of our lives.

If you can move furniture around, try to get into a circle and, if you have a partner, sit opposite each other so as not to be the center of attention. Allow for time after the lesson to take prayer requests – either have the young people write them out, or jot down spoken requests. End the study with a time of prayer and encourage the kids to come back next week. Following the Bible discussion group, make sure to put all furniture back in place.

Write down the names of three people to contact who can assist or support your efforts.

IN CONCLUSION

We hope this manual lends guidance as you prayerfully consider getting started. It may seem like a lot to do, but if the Lord is putting this together, you are not doing it alone. If you have other questions or concerns not addressed in this booklet, or need further information, contact Straight Ahead Ministries at (508) 753-8700, fax us at (508) 438-0182, or visit us at www.straightahead.org.

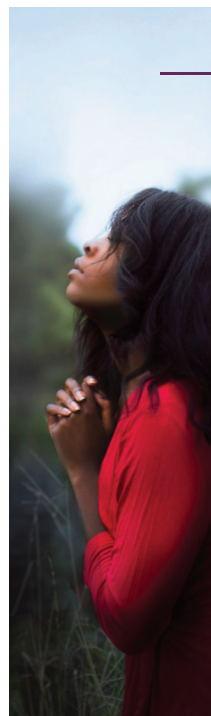
Sometimes, personnel changes bring renewed opportunities; other times, the Lord changes the hearts of those we have met.

JUST DO IT

Once you gain permission to start a Bible discussion group, be prepared to undergo a criminal background check. If you have an adult record, be up-front about it. Many facilities allow former offenders inside, but some do not. You may want to contact the person you have been working with at the facility to discuss their policy.

If the facility does not offer an orientation, ask to learn more about the program from staff members. It's best to know the rules ahead of time since there will be people in the facilities who will want you there, others who will be indifferent to your presence, and still others who will not want you there at all.

Do not give anyone any reason to disapprove of the Bible discussion group. Always be mindful that there will likely be spiritual battles going on. Because of those battles, have a prayer chain established. Each of Straight Ahead's Bible discussion groups has a corresponding group of prayer partners who pray for the leaders and for those attending the study.



PRAY WITHOUT CEASING

If the facility allows it, take prayer requests from the young people at the discussion group (and from those who do not attend if you can) and then pass them on to your prayer partners. It's important to only use first names and to take out any identifying information, such as where the young person is from. The young people are amazed and blessed that people they may never meet care for them enough to pray for them. We recommend that people from your church commit to praying, since we know that prayer is the foundation upon which effective ministries rest. Also, ask the partners to pray during the time that the Bible discussion group is going on. In that way, your church becomes even more involved.

One way to get to know the young people is by hanging out with them prior to the beginning of the Bible discussion group. Ask permission to come to dinner your first night or come in early to spend some time together. If you can, sit with the kids, introduce yourself as a volunteer, and get acquainted with as many kids as you can. This is a great way to get interest in the study going. It's possible

Write down a verse that guides or motivates you toward leading a Bible study with juvenile offenders. Also, in one sentence, write a summary of your motivation.

KNOW YOUR GIFTS

Once your motivations are in order, examine where your gifts lie. You do not have to be cool, young, a Biblical scholar, or a former prisoner to be a good Bible discussion group leader. You can be all of these things, some of them, or none of them. What you do need to be is a person willing to love as Jesus taught us to love. It may surprise you to know that the majority of Straight Ahead volunteers never worked with youth, led a Bible study or ministered to at-risk youth prior to their interest in Straight Ahead Ministries. What they all have in common, however, is a teachable spirit and an ability to facilitate discussion.

A teachable spirit is one that is open to accepting young people as they are and realizing there are many things we can learn from them. It is also a spirit willing to accept rules of the institution, authority of Scripture and the authority of a local church. It's one willing to be open to new teachings and leadings.

An effective Bible discussion group leader is someone who is:

- Relational and non-threatening, who can discuss Scripture with teens in a small group setting;
- Consistent, dependable, maintains a positive attitude and who can accept and love kids unconditionally;
- Able to build bridges to the Gospel through whatever background a teen may have, no matter how different it is. For example, a volunteer could use a Jehovah Witness' basic belief in God to begin to explain about Christ and the Gospel.

Married couples make wonderful volunteers as they allow teens to observe a



stable marriage relationship. Otherwise, two men for boys' facilities or two women for girls' facilities are best. Generally, lay people are usually better than pastors, due to time considerations and priorities.

Straight Ahead Ministries encourages its volunteers to be commissioned by their churches as local missionaries whose mission field is the facility. Such church involvement also encourages prayer support and outreach opportunities, such as providing gifts to juvenile offenders at Christmas.

- *What gifts do you bring to a ministry to juvenile offenders?*
- *How does your pastor feel about this type of ministry? (If you haven't spoken to your pastor, it is important to do that so the church can be behind you in this ministry.)*
- *Is your church committed to this type of ministry?*
- *If not, who has a similar heart for kids in your congregation?*
- *Who else can you recruit to serve with you? (Having a partner is essential.)*

We consider our Bible study leaders to be missionaries to incarcerated youth. The church needs to be behind its missionaries not only to support them, but also to nurture those who believe through their ministry.



KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

The next step is to learn about the young people you'll be working with and about the system in which they're involved. We recommend reading "A Way Out," the true stories of five juvenile offenders who came to Christ during their time in lock up, as told to Straight Ahead Ministries staff. There are also many other resources available that will give you insights into both the world of at-risk youth and how to reach them with the Gospel, including several books written by Straight Ahead co-founder and president, Dr. Scott Larson. Straight Ahead also offers trainings and seminars both in-person and on the web. These recommended resources can be found at www.straightahead.org.

ANSWERING TOUGH QUESTIONS

The staff will likely have several questions, the first usually concerning the separation of church and state. You can reframe the issue by pointing out that because the Bible discussion groups are voluntarily attended, the institution is not promoting any particular religion, rather, it is allowing young people their constitutional right of free association and freedom to express their religious views.

If asked why a "Christian" discussion group as opposed to another type should be allowed, explain that you are not asking them to exclude other groups, but if the young people have any religious affiliation, 90 percent (or whatever it is in your area) would be Christian, whether it is Roman Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox.

Your Bible discussion group would be open to all, but the institution would be allowing the vast majority of its residents to worship in the tradition that they were raised in, even if nominally. You may be asked questions concerning controversial issues like abortion and homosexuality. The best way to address such questions is to explain that you are not there to judge what others do or believe; you are simply there to share that God loves teens and wants to give them hope. You can tell them that Jesus said that the entire Bible is based on the commands of "love God" and "love your neighbor."

This is where you will have to do some soul-searching and will have to pray for wisdom on what to say and what to leave unsaid. You never want to hide your faith and beliefs, but your focus in ministry should be on getting young people to come to faith in Christ and then let the Holy Spirit and Scripture do the convicting.

IF THE DOORS CLOSE

If the facility has a chaplain or someone who leads religious services, ask to meet with that person. They may be open to more help or may not want you there. If the chaplain or leaders are not open to your coming in, they may know of another facility within the area that may be approachable.

At the close of the meeting, ask for a tour of the facility. This shows that you are interested, and demonstrates that you are comfortable in a place where many would not venture. Even if you are denied permission to lead a Bible discussion group, express gratitude for the meeting and ask the person to please call you if something changes. A few days after the meeting send the contact person a note of thanks. If you do not hear back from that person, contact the facility several months later.



(available from Straight Ahead). If the answer is “no,” ask to send an information packet to the person you are speaking with. Most people are open to that. As you send the information, continue to pray for the wisdom to know if the “no” is a challenge or a message from the Lord. If it’s a “no” from God, there may be another facility in your area that is open to a Bible discussion group. We have found that once we get started in one facility, others become open as the directors share what “works” and what doesn’t in the lives of the young people at the facility.

A week after sending the packet, call the contact person to see if they have had time to review it. Ask if you can meet to discuss the program and any concerns the facility administration may have about it. If the person states that he or she does not want to meet with you, ask the reason; refrain from becoming upset, and never become disrespectful. We have found that sometimes a “no” later becomes “yes” through prayer and persistence. And it doesn’t hurt to ask if you can call back in the future to see if anything changes.



MEETING WITH THE DOORKEEPERS

If the person does agree to meet, be in prayer about presenting your idea and ask others to pray as well. Bring along an extra information packet in case the one you sent was misplaced or in case an additional person attends the meeting.

Begin the meeting by asking about the facility – how many kids are there, their ages, what programs the facility offers, how long it has been in existence as a juvenile facility, and whether they’ve had religious programming in the past. (Skip the last question if there is a sense of hostility in the room.)

Next, clearly present what you want to do. Emphasize that the discussion groups are always voluntarily attended, that they are non-denominational and not affiliated with any church, every young person will have an opportunity to express his or her ideas and beliefs, and that the studies are topical and use the Bible as a guide. Explain that the discussion group normally meets once a week for an hour.

Next, skim through a sample Bible discussion group booklet together, explaining how similar Straight Ahead Bible discussion groups have been in place since 1987, and that currently scores of such discussion groups are held weekly in many states (if you know of other Straight Ahead groups in the area, mention where they are located).

In addition to those resources, there are steps that you can take to understand the world of at-risk kids live. While many Christians shy away from hip-hop music, certain cable channels and other entertainment, it’s good to be familiar with those media outlets and others on social media to better understand where many of our youth are getting or expressing their values. The messages are harsh, but they reflect what many at-risk youth feel.

Another great resource for information is the internet. The U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention has a wealth of information on juvenile offenders, risk factors, statistics and helpful resources (www.ojjdp.gov).

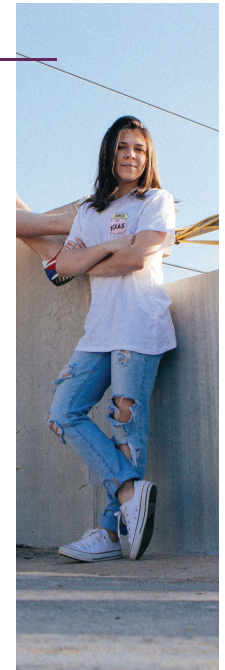
Finally, to get a real understanding of the world of at-risk youth, get involved in their lives. Listen to their stories, their dreams, and their desires. If invited, visit their homes, meet their friends, and enter their lives. You will be amazed at how welcome you will be if you’re there to learn, to listen, and to bring Christ’s love. If you’re there for any other reason, you’ll be found out and you will not be there for long.

THE KIDS AND THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

In the 1800’s, states began to see the need to treat children who broke the law differently from adult offenders. In the 1960’s the concept developed into a “treatment model” of justice rather than one of punishment. In the 1990s, however, many states reverted back to a system of punishment. Where there was once rehabilitation, there was incarceration. More recently, we are in a period where courts, leaders of the juvenile justice system, and even politicians are recognizing juveniles are not miniature adults, but have different neurological and psychological capacities, and are taking those into account in treatment models. Such is not the case everywhere, but it is taking hold in more places.

Whatever the setting, a Bible discussion group can be an effective, transformative tool. Why? Because the Gospel offers all of us a way though whatever it is we struggle with, through His transformation. Many young people in the juvenile justice system are similar to the young people in your church, except they got caught.

Others may be quite different, due to past trauma and neglect. For instance, a neglected child may be drawn to you and to the Lord because of the unconditional love that you show, but have trouble forming a bond or attachment because they



have built up walls to keep people out. When children have been hurt by those they've trusted, they may not be able to reach out in ways we expect. While you do not have to become a counselor to lead a Bible discussion group, you do need to be prepared for how past issues will show up in the kids in lock up.

In addition to knowing about the kids, it's good to get to know how the juvenile justice system works. Most state-regulated juvenile justice systems consist of:

- Detention centers, where young people are held until they go to trial;
- Assessment centers, where they go after an adjudication of delinquency (they are usually not "convicted" of crimes until adulthood) to determine where they should spend their time in the system; and
- Treatment centers, where they are sent to serve their time and, presumably, receive rehabilitation services.

Each environment calls for a different Bible discussion group approach. In detention centers, you find frightened young people searching for help and comfort at a critical time in their lives. Because you may see them only once, it's important to present a Gospel invitation regularly. In assessment centers, you may see the same young people three or four times, so the topics you select can begin to plant the seeds of knowledge they can carry with them. In treatment centers, young people can stay for several months or even years. Some young people may feel they don't "need" God as much as they did before facing the judge. Yet, it is at such longer-term centers that a season of discipling can develop.



KNOCKING ON DOORS

Once you have a basic understanding of the young people and the system you are getting involved with, the next step is approaching a juvenile facility to see if it is open to the idea of having a Bible discussion group. To find one, you can do a Google search to see what is out there and you can contact lawyers, social workers, judges and juvenile probation officers to determine what juvenile facilities are in your local area. You can also contact Straight Ahead Ministries for assistance in locating a juvenile facility.

Be prepared to give a presentation regarding your proposed Bible discussion group to the staff of the facility. (A sample letter giving institutional program directors an overview of the proposed Bible discussion group can be found at the end of this booklet.) Share the purpose of the group and who will lead it. Remember, many

non-Christians may think of you as a radical televangelist who will bring condemnation and wreak havoc in their facility. If you've read this far, that is not you! Your purpose is to bring love and hope to hurting kids and that will come across.

Most centers are open to spiritual programming and see Bible discussion groups as a way to help the kids in their treatment. Because of the sensitive nature of spirituality, the groups are often called the "Church Group" or "Spiritual Awareness Group", etc. The name doesn't matter so long as it opens doors.

The best way to get into a facility is through someone you know. "Dropping a name" and personal contacts can go a long way toward opening some otherwise closed doors.

If that's not a realistic option, call the facility and ask for the person in charge of programming. Explain that you are interested in meeting to discuss a program for bringing volunteers into the facility to lead a non-denominational, spiritual awareness group.

List the detention centers located in your area.

1. Check the ones that have given you permission to start a ministry.
2. Underline those that have been contacted, but have not given you permission yet.
3. Circle the ones you have not contacted.
4. Write down a strategy, based on this section, that will help you either get started in the facilities where you have permission, or get access to facilities that are currently not opened. Always surround your efforts with prayer.

WHEN THE DOORS OPEN

At this point, a few things can happen:

You may be told that no religious programs are allowed at the facility, or that someone else is leading religious programming, or that they'd like to meet with you to discuss your ideas.

If you receive a "yes" to meet, send a Bible discussion group information packet