

Stateville Prison Ministry Team: FAQ's

1) What happens when we first get there?

We go first to the Visitor Center and check in as a group. One of our official volunteer chaplains (Ben Blobaum, Fred Nelson, or Mike Willis) will be the point person for this. There will/should be a Gate Pass waiting for us with the names of those who have received clearance to enter the facility. We need to sign the log-in sheet and submit our Driver's License to the correctional officer so that we can get entered into the computer before entering. Our licenses will be returned to us along with a peel-off name tag. There is a rest room in the Visitor's Center.

2) Then what?

We'll get back in our vehicles and drive around the perimeter of the facility to the Northern Reception Center. We'll leave all money, cell phones, etc. in our cars. We will take our car keys, our driver's licenses, and our name tags into the facility, however. We'll then unload the carts and boxes from the truck, and open the boxes and remove packing material before entering the facility so that the officers can more easily check the contents. We'll then proceed into the facility using the staff entrance and log-in with officer there. Once we've cleared security, there will be an opportunity to use the rest room once again before heading down a long corridor to the cell blocks.

3) What do we do when we get to the cell blocks?

- a) It works best when we work in teams. Depending on how many volunteers we get, teams of two or three work well. Each cell block has 3 tiers with 14 cells on each tier. A cell normally holds two inmates, but some will only have one, and a few will probably be empty. We usually go the very last cell blocks (they seem to get visited less often) and work our way back to the front.
- b) We normally distribute Free on the Inside Bibles, the Spiritual Survival Guide to Prison and Beyond. We often have some current copies of the devotional book, Our Daily Bread. Depending on availability, we often distribute 2 kinds of Bibles (mostly English & a few Spanish). You will notice that many Hispanic inmates will ask for an English version since they don't read Spanish (even though they might be fluent in speaking it). It's helpful information to the inmates to hear that it is a "full and complete" version (i.e., with the Old Testament), is large-print (many have lost their glasses or contacts) and is "easy-to-read" (with a simplified vocabulary).
- c) Many inmates are depressed and will be sleeping. It is definitely okay to knock on their cell window and ask them if they'd like a Bible or Spiritual Survival Guide. They don't get many visitors in the NRC (and no personal visits), so almost everyone will appreciate the fact that you're there even if they don't want or need a Bible or SSG. Sometimes the cell block that you enter will be almost empty – they will have the guys out in the exercise yard for an hour. It's a good idea to check with the officer in charge of that cell block about when they'll be back.
- d) Speaking of the officers, it is wise and helpful (and part of our ministry) to introduce yourself to them as you enter the cell block and let them know why you're there. You can tell them that you'll be putting the SSG under their door. Sometimes the gap is too small and you'll need to leave them outside the doors and ask the officers if they could kindly put them through the "chuck-hole" (the little hatch that is opened to allow food to be passed in and out) when they go around later. Remember to let them know that you appreciate them.
- e) When you get to the cell just let the inmates know why you're there. If there's opportunity, say that you're there because you want them to know that they're not forgotten and that God loves and remembers them. I usually say something like "Gentleman, how are you doing? Can I get you a Bible today? We've got complete, large-print, easy-to-understand Bibles? Would you like one?" One of them will usually answer. You'll often have to follow up with "How about your "cellie" (cellmate)?"

Does he want one too?” Depending on the cell and the height of the bottom of the door, you can often open the Bible to Proverbs and slide it under the door. Otherwise, you can leave them leaning against the cell door. Sometimes you can balance them on the top of the chock-hole, but we’ve found that after a while the Bibles are a bit floppy and tend to fall to the floor. You can also ask if they’d like a Spiritual Survival Guide to Prison and tell them that we’ve worked with inmates here at Stateville to come up with this. If they’ve been in the NRC for a while, they may have already received a copy of the Survival Guide. If so, you can ask them if they found it helpful.

f) From time to time you will be asked about other reading material (like novels or a Qu’ran). You can simply tell them that “we’re specializing in Bibles, Survival Guides, and prayers today!”

g) Some inmates will want to engage you in conversation. You should welcome this, as long as you pay attention to the following do’s and don’ts:

- Don’t make promises.
- Don’t give or take anything from them.
- Don’t pass on any requests. Simply tell them that they have to talk to the officer (we don’t really know what’s going on and don’t want to undermine the officer’s authority).
- Don’t ask why they’re there.
- **By all means, do offer to pray for them. Inmates will appreciate if you pray for strength, for courage, for their relationships with their families and for the welfare of their families; for a new level of relationship with God. Some of them are appealing their case and will ask you to pray for that, too. If you’re uncertain how to approach that, simply pray that the truth would be known, that justice and mercy might prevail, that God’s will would be done, and that the inmate would be patient during the process. Praying with inmates is a huge gift you can both give and receive – so be sure to open yourself up to this!**

h) As we go along we’ll need to stack and consolidate our empty boxes. We’ll remove them from the facility and recycle them.

i) If there are any leftover Bibles or SSGs, we’ll store them in the “Chaplain’s Closet” before we leave.

4) What happens when we leave?

a) We need to sign out at two places (the NRC and back at the Visitor’s Center). When we leave the NRC we’ll get back in our vehicles and drive back around to the Visitor’s Center to sign out there again.

b) Many of us often go out for a meal afterwards to share stories and impressions. There is a Cracker Barrel Restaurant on I-55 and Weber Road.