



Building Trusting Relationships  
Listening • Caring • Encouraging

# **Volunteer Training Manual**

**December 2021**



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## Introduction

Thank you for serving as a volunteer for Yokefellow Prison Ministry of N.C., Inc. (Yokefellow)! Your role as a volunteer is vitally important to this ministry. Other than Staff, everyone affiliated with Yokefellow serves as a volunteer. The ministry could not function without our volunteers -- You are the backbone of the ministry! Please know that your service is very much needed and appreciated. Thank you for all you do!

### *Overview of Yokefellow*

Yokefellow is an interdenominational, racially-diverse Christian ministry of reconciliation begun in 1969 (and incorporated in NC in 1972), which includes both lay and clergy, male and female. It is founded on the idea that people's lives are changed through committed relationships.

The ministry is conducted by trained volunteers who lead weekly meetings of small groups inside North Carolina's correctional institutions. Yokefellow is not focused on worship, preaching, teaching, counseling, or studying the Bible, but is a ministry of listening, sharing, caring, encouragement and support provided by community volunteers from the "outside" yoked in fellowship with those on the "inside" through weekly small group meetings.

The Biblical foundation of Yokefellow's commitment is the invitation by Christ our Lord in the Gospel of Matthew 11:29-30:

*"Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me;  
for I am gentle and lowly of heart,  
and you will find rest for your souls.  
For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."*

Yokefellow's objectives are to...

- Provide an open and inviting setting for inmates to examine their lives, talk about their faith, and search for direction and purpose with others who are committed to do the same.
- Offer opportunities for inmates to build relationships with Yokefellow volunteers in the weekly group meetings, thereby lessening their separation from the "outside world" and helping them prepare for a transition back into productive contribution in society.

## *History of Yokefellow*

Yokefellow Prison Ministry of North Carolina, Inc. is an outgrowth of the Yokefellow movement, begun in the 1950's by the Quaker theologian and leader, Elton Trueblood. On his way to a speaking engagement in Cleveland, Ohio in 1946, Dr. Trueblood read Matthew 11:28-30:

“Come unto me all ye who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly of heart, and ye shall find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

This gave him an inspiration centering on the image and function of the yoke. Just as oxen yoked together can accomplish more than a single animal, why can't Christians “yoked together” give added strength to the cause of Christ? This birthed the Yokefellow model for ministry: Christians yoked together for fellowship, encouragement, and mutual support.

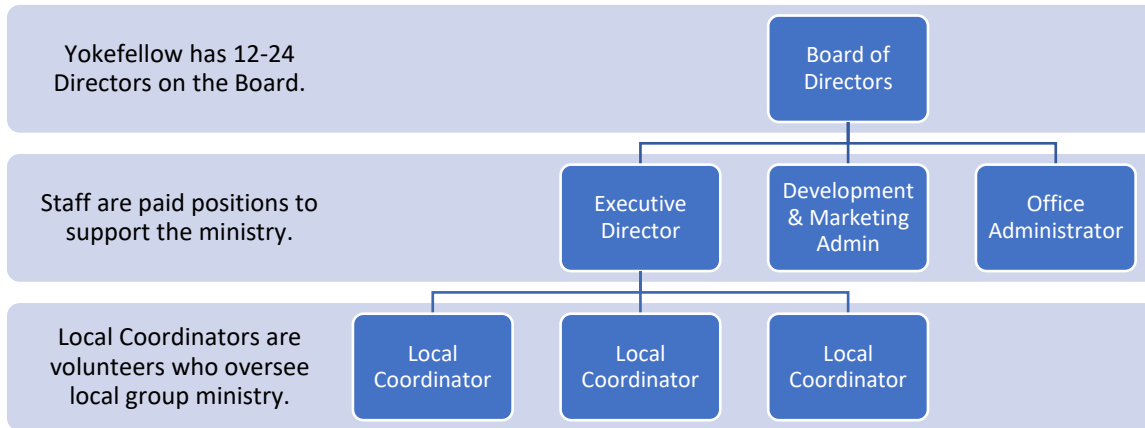
In 1964, three pastors from North Carolina went to Pennsylvania for a Yokefellow retreat. They were so impressed that they brought the Yokefellow model and dream back to North Carolina. For the next few years, Yokefellow was shared primarily in local church and retreat settings. In 1969, the first effort to carry Yokefellow into a prison in North Carolina took place, and Yokefellow Prison Ministry of North Carolina was born. The ministry was later incorporated as a NC nonprofit in 1972.

Since 1969, Yokefellow Prison Ministry has lived out its mission statement:

“to enable prisoners, yoked in personal relationship with community volunteers, to examine their lives; experience the forgiveness, healing, and power of God's love; and return to family and community with a covenant commitment to personal responsibility and contribution.”

Today, over 300 volunteers from a variety of churches and ministries across the state of North Carolina conduct weekly Yokefellow meetings for inmates in 2/3 of the state's prisons. Our volunteers are male and female, clergy and laity, from different racial, ethnic, and denominational backgrounds. Some have served for over 30 years! Thousands of inmates have found acceptance, a listening ear, an encouraging voice, and the reality of Christ's love.

# Yokefellow Structure



## *Board of Directors*

Yokefellow's bylaws require 12-24 Directors to serve on the Board. This is a volunteer position. The Board oversees the Staff and ensures the ministry fulfills Yokefellow's vision and mission.

## *Staff Positions*

The **Executive Director** is a paid position overseeing the day-to-day operations of the ministry. The Executive Director is responsible for all aspects of the ministry, including strategy and programs.

The **Development & Marketing Administrator** is a paid position responsible for developing the financial base and publicity of the ministry.

The **Office Administrator** is a paid position providing administrative support and overseeing finances.

## *Local Coordinators*

Each local Yokefellow group has a volunteer Local Coordinator, who takes care of administrative duties to ensure the local group ministry runs efficiently and effectively. This is the primary point of contact for volunteers.

## *Volunteers*

Yokefellow volunteers visit inmates at a local prison on a weekly basis. Volunteers are Christians and must complete Yokefellow and local prison training before they can participate in the Yokefellow ministry.

## Volunteer Application and Requirements

Potential volunteers are required to complete a Volunteer Application Packet (see Appendix A). In addition to completing and submitting a signed Volunteer Application Form, applicants must have a pastor, Bible study leader, or equivalent submit a letter of good standing and two non-family members submit letters of recommendations directly to the Executive Director.

After the Volunteer Application Packet has been fully completed and submitted, the Executive Director will contact the applicant about completing Yokefellow training as well as training for the local prison. The Executive Director will also put the applicant in contact with the Local Coordinator for the local group serving the desired prison.

Before volunteering with a local Yokefellow group, volunteers must meet the following requirements:

- Be a Christian who has been active within the Body of Christ, such as with a church or ministry.
- Complete Yokefellow training and receive a Yokefellow volunteer card.
- Complete training for the local prison and receive a volunteer card (“blue card”) from the Prison System of North Carolina or the federal prison.

To continue volunteering with a local Yokefellow group, volunteers must do the following:

### *Grow as a Disciple of Christ*

- Engage in the Seven Yokefellow Disciplines.
- Focus on inmates rather than themselves during local meetings.
- Listen to and encourage inmates without judgment.

### *Respect Prison Policies*

- Cooperate with prison personnel.
- Refrain from giving or receiving any item to or from inmates.

### *Respect Yokefellow Policies*

- Attend Yokefellow annual meetings, if possible.
- Complete Yokefellow recertification training regularly.
- Invite others to volunteer and encourage local church support.
- Notify Executive Director about changes to contact information.
- Participate in local Yokefellow meetings regularly.
- Refrain from preaching the gospel and providing Bible studies in local meetings.
- Respect inmates, fellow volunteers, the Local Coordinator, and Yokefellow staff.



## Preparing for Volunteer Service

Once applicants have completed the application process and all required training (both with Yokefellow and the local prison), they are ready to serve as volunteers. The Executive Director will connect the volunteer with the Local Coordinator for the prison.

### *Local Coordinator*

The Local Coordinator is the primary point of contact for the volunteer. The Local Coordinator is responsible for all administrative matters related to the local prison ministry, such as when and where to meet for local Yokefellow meetings. Please notify the Local Coordinator about any changes to your contact information or status of volunteering (if you plan to go inactive for over a month). The Local Coordinator is also your first point of contact for questions, concerns, or suggestions related to the prison ministry. If you encounter issues with an inmate, prison personnel, or a fellow volunteer, notify the Local Coordinator immediately.

### *Executive Director*

The Executive Director is paid Yokefellow staff who oversees the Local Coordinators. If you have concerns, questions, or suggestions that are more global in nature or that your Local Coordinator is unable to address, please email the Executive Director at [info@yokefellowprisonministry.org](mailto:info@yokefellowprisonministry.org) or call 336-740-0392.

### *Seven Disciplines of Yokefellows*

Yokefellow is a Christian ministry. Thus, volunteers are expected to grow in Christian discipleship. As they transform further into the image of Christ, they are better able to communicate God's love to the inmates they serve. Yokefellow volunteers commit to engage in the following seven disciplines of Yokefellows regularly, which are commonly-accepted disciplines for Christian living:

- (1) **Prayer:** Pray every day, preferably at the beginning of the day.
- (2) **Scripture:** Seek God's guidance through reverent reading of the Bible every day, following a definite plan.
- (3) **Worship:** Participate, at least once a week, in public worship of God.
- (4) **Money:** Return to God a definite portion of your income to support the Christian cause.
- (5) **Service:** Invest a specific amount of your time in humble acts of love and service to others.
- (6) **Witness:** Make an unapologetic witness in daily life, daily work, and daily words.
- (7) **Study:** Become a better-informed Christian by careful study of Christian books.

## Understanding the Inmates

Before volunteering with inmates, it is important to understand them. The following statistics were provided by the NC Prison Fellowship:

- 95% are not close to their fathers.
- 80% of female inmates were abused.
- 66% come from broken homes.
- 66% used/experimented with drugs.
- 65% have previous criminal records.
- 60%-80% are functionally illiterate.
- 50% of male inmates were abused.
- 50% did not go beyond the 6<sup>th</sup> grade.
- 45% were unemployed when arrested.

Prison is a desperate place. Many inmates are lonely, insecure, starved for love, and depressed. They may suffer from addictions or mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual disorders...or even a combination of all of these. When inmates do not seek help for their problems, chances are they will return to prison within one to four years. If they do not change what they are doing, they will continue to get what they are getting. The answer to change is choice.

Many inmates have been imprisoned several times and have accepted the Christian faith each time they were incarcerated, only to return to prison several years after release. Persons with certain behavioral challenges have a propensity or a penchant to do the same harmful act over and over again. This results in the same punishment repeatedly. Virtually every prison in the state has as many as 2-4 Christian prison ministries visiting these inmates at least once per week. If the very essence of Christianity is repentance (the act of changing behavior) and we still have 65% recidivism, then something is wrong with this picture. Maybe we, as Christian prison volunteers, need to spend more time listening to these people and get to know them a little better. We need to encourage them to work on behavioral improvements.

In order to change a behavioral challenge, a person would do best by...

- 1) Admitting to or recognizing the problem(s).
- 2) Confessing to a friend, a clergyperson, or a trained professional.
- 3) Making amends.
- 4) Joining a support group.

The above steps are very difficult for most people and require much encouragement from family, friends, and clergy.

As volunteers with face-to-face contact, we can...

- 1) Make a friend, be a friend, and bring a friend to Christ.
- 2) Refrain from preaching, teaching, or proselytizing.
- 3) Just show up and listen, encourage, and pray.

The inmates we visit do not care how much we know until they know how much we care. We must first gain their trust, assurance, and confidence so that they know we are real and true friends. Gain their friendship by showing them that you really are concerned about what they are concerned about. You cannot understand their concerns without a great deal of "listening in order to understand." Until you establish this foundation of friendship, all your good intentions will most likely be viewed with great skepticism! They will see through your intentions like a windowpane and resist your sincere efforts to bring them into your world of fellowship. These friendships are oftentimes not easy or quickly attainable. Our patience will be tested for sure. Until they are yoked with you in friendship, bringing them to Christ may not be attainable.

### *Faith of Inmates*

As Yokefellow meetings are open to all inmates who the prison personnel permit to attend, the inmates you minister to may already be Christians, embrace a different faith, or have no faith at all. The goal of a Yokefellow meeting is not to convert attendees to the Christian faith. Instead, your role is to listen to whatever the inmates would like to talk about, sharing God's love as you listen attentively and express sincere interest and caring, even to those with a different or no faith. As the inmates see Christ in the way you interact with them, some will be drawn to get to know the God who leads you to treat them in such a loving and compassionate way. When the inmates ask you about your faith, that is your invitation to discuss the Christian faith with them.

### *Custody Levels*

NC prisons have five custodial levels in descending order of security based upon the perceived level of possible safety risks:

- Close
- Medium
- Minimum I
- Minimum II
- Minimum III

When deciding whether to volunteer at a particular prison, Yokefellow recommends inquiring into the custodial level for that prison and ensuring that level of possible safety risk is a good fit for you. Note that inmates convicted of more dangerous crimes are likely to reside in higher custody-level prisons.

### *More Than Meets the Eye*

Be mindful that the version of the inmate you see in a Yokefellow meeting may be very different from the version others see within the prison. The primary goal of inmates is *survival*, and inmates can go to great lengths to ensure their survival within the prison walls. The vulnerability that an inmate shows in a Yokefellow meeting can endanger him or her in the general population. Remember that you are only seeing one side of an inmate during a Yokefellow meeting. The inmate's behavior may be very different outside of those meetings.

## Guidelines for Prison Ministry

A basic rule of prison ministry is that a volunteer must follow prison policy when visiting and ministering to inmates. If a situation arises that is uncertain, find out the policy or get clearance from a prison official before acting. It is best to say, "I don't know, but I will find out what the policy is and get an answer for you." In short: "Ask if you do not know."

### *Best Practices: What to Do*

1. Be an example of truth, hope, honesty, and optimism to the inmate.
2. Be certain that what you tell an inmate is policy, the truth, etc.
3. Realize your limitations about how much help, support, and counsel you can bring to the inmate.
4. Learn the rules and regulations of the institution and always follow them.
5. As a group, arrive together and on time and leave together and on time (or a few minutes early).
6. Leave keys, weapons (i.e., pocket knife), pocketbook, etc. in a locker or a vehicle outside the gate.
7. Bring a valid, current photo ID and authorized visitor's badge.
8. Be extremely careful how you receive and handle information that supposedly is "confidential."
9. Carefully choose an appropriate place to pray with, counsel, or listen to an inmate.
10. Be supportive of prison staff and administration.
11. Share concerns with the administration, especially any expressions from inmates about hurting themselves, breaking prison rules, etc.
12. Accept inmates as they are.
13. Be cautious about writing letters on behalf of inmates, saying only what you know about them.
14. Work at being a good listener, giving encouragement, respecting others' personal stories, offering hope, being trustworthy.
15. Refer all legal questions (probation, parole, prison) to prison staff.
16. Dress appropriately, following the dress code.
17. Be ready to properly deal with: flirting, romantic advances, con games, physical contact.

*Avoid These Practices: What NOT to Do!*

1. Bringing anything into the institution, or taking anything out of the institution for an inmate, including mailing anything for an inmate.
2. Making phone calls or delivering messages for an inmate.
3. Accepting gifts from or engaging in any business deals with an inmate or his/her family.
4. Engaging in any physical contact with an inmate which may arouse sexual emotions, or be wrongly interpreted by others.
5. Discussing one inmate's problems or personal story with another inmate.
6. Ask about the inmate's crime.
7. Giving or sending money to any inmate.
8. Making promises you cannot keep.
9. Sharing your own personal or church problems with an inmate.
10. Criticizing other churches, denominations, faiths, races, countries or cultures.
11. Stressing any particular denominations doctrines or practices that cause division or confusion.
12. Giving an inmate your personal information such as: phone number, address, e-mail, etc.
13. Criticizing the prison staff or administration.
14. Running on prison grounds.
15. Doing anything you wonder about without first discussing it with the staff.

*Be Cautious About...*

1. Helping an inmate's family with their rent, fuel, telephone, doctor bills, etc.
2. Loaning books, commentaries, Bibles, etc. to inmates.
3. "Following" inmates from prison to prison in terms of letters and visits.
4. Becoming too involved in an inmate's case or his/her family problems.
5. Going to an inmate's house to visit his parents, wife, family, etc.
6. Accepting the inmate's view of things (crime story, family, education, etc.) as being the whole truth.

### *Dress Code for Volunteers*

Failure to follow this dress code can result in being denied entry:

1. No shorts (male or female).
2. No dresses or skirts above mid-thigh.
3. No bare feet.
4. No “see-through” shirts without an undershirt.
5. No garment displaying a mid-rib or stomach area.
6. No tank tops.
7. No dresses or blouses that are excessively low cut.
8. No sleeveless dresses/blouses without appropriate underclothes.
9. No skin-tight clothing.
10. Other apparel, if judged by the shift officer-in-charge or chaplain, to prevent the orderly operation of the facility.

### *Prison/Department of Corrections Guidelines for Religious Volunteers*

1. Security is a must for good communication. Please respect prison staff at all times.
2. In general, the inmates are very respectful and friendly to Yokefellow volunteers. But, remember you are not at home.
3. Please do not give anything to any inmate, except materials of a religious nature that have been approved in advance.
4. Do not debate with inmates or others. Anything confidential that you learn should remain that way. As a Yokefellow volunteer, you will want to share your experience with friends, but be careful not to share any potentially confidential information.
5. Do not accept **anything** from any inmate.
6. Do not contact families, lawyers, judges, or make phone calls for any inmate without first talking with the chaplain or the inmate’s counselor.
7. Tell the chaplain or officer if you are having any problems.
8. Do not give your address or phone number to any inmate.
9. Do not criticize or defend the staff (or the system) in the presence of the inmates. These comments should be addressed to the chaplain.

10. Do not believe everything the inmate tells you. Some inmates tend to exaggerate and distort the facts.
11. Build a relationship of trust with an inmate. The inmate may not know how to relate to others. Expect him or her to distrust you at first. Be patient. Trust will come in time.
12. Be yourself. Please do not approach the inmate as a psychiatrist, lawyer, or minister (unless you are one). Try to relate to him or her honestly and simply – “person to person.” This will make it easier for the inmate to do so with you.



## Local Yokefellow Meetings

Local Yokefellow meetings take place weekly. As Yokefellow volunteers meet with inmates week after week and month after month, inmates learn that volunteers truly care about them. Then, as inmates receive this love, they also learn that God cares about them. Consistency is key to communicating God's love to inmates.

### *Overview*

**The Concept:** To help inmates yoke with Jesus Christ in their effort to turn their lives around.

**The Method:** Volunteers meet with inmates at a prison on a regular basis (usually weekly) for an evening of prayer and small group table discussions. Two to three inmates sit with one volunteer to discuss a given topic or an individual's concern. One rule applies: *when one person is talking, everyone else listens*. Although each person is encouraged to speak, it is not mandatory. Sometimes silence is reflective.

**The Objective:** To give inmates a chance to talk about themselves and their concerns to someone without fear of being judged. Sharing and listening to inmates can be therapeutic. Encourage inmates to be the best they can be, to exercise their minds as well as their bodies, and to pray.

**The Volunteers:** Christian volunteers come from many denominations. This requires that they leave their denominational agendas at the prison door when entering the unit. Any questions from inmates pertaining to dogma, rules/practices, or various Christian ideologies are best left to the prison chaplain or personal clergy for clarification. Remember, Jesus Christ is non-denominational. Effective listening skills are a gift from God. It is difficult to learn anything when you are talking.

**The Goal:** The goal of Yokefellow is to help reduce recidivism. The current rate of recidivism in North Carolina prisons is 40%. We believe that volunteer prison ministries can help lower this statistic by encouraging inmates to seriously consider spiritual renewal.

### *Structure*

Local Yokefellow meetings have the following structure:

1. Devotional moment of greeting and prayer
2. Informal time to welcome new participants and set up small groups for sharing
3. Sharing & listening time (at least 45 minutes) in small groups for inmates to talk about anything they wish
4. Closing prayer

### *Icebreaker Topics for the Beginning of a Meeting*

Considering using the following icebreaker topics at the beginning of the sharing session:

1. I came to this meeting tonight because \_\_\_\_\_.
2. One good thing I have learned since being incarcerated is \_\_\_\_\_.
3. My favorite relative is \_\_\_\_\_. Why?
4. I wish my dad (or primary guardian) had told me \_\_\_\_\_ while I was growing up.
5. My mom (taught) (did not teach) me very much while growing up. Explain.
6. How many “buddies” have come to visit you since you’ve been incarcerated? If none, why?
7. How many “friends” have come to visit you since you’ve been incarcerated?
8. Buddies are temporary; friends are forever. True or False?
9. What is the difference between a friend and a buddy?
10. Who was my best friend while we were growing up? Why?
11. I (loved) (hated) school. Why?
12. I (did) (did not) go to church while growing up. Why?
13. Being incarcerated has changed my life? True or False. Why?
14. My favorite school teacher was \_\_\_\_\_. Why?
15. My favorite role model is \_\_\_\_\_. Why?
16. Is Michael Jordan a good role model? Why?
17. My favorite sport is \_\_\_\_\_. Why?
18. The USA is a (good) (bad) country to live in and raise a family. Why?
19. I (believe) (do not believe) in capital punishment. Why?
20. I (like) (dislike) “Yokefellows” because \_\_\_\_\_.
21. My plan when I am released is to \_\_\_\_\_. Why?
22. I (believe) (do not believe) in God. Why?
23. Prison life (has) (has not) helped make me a better person? Why?
24. Things that have helped change my behavior for the best are \_\_\_\_\_. Why?

### *Sharing & Listening*

Sharing & listening time accounts for the bulk of the meeting time and takes place in small groups, ideally with a 1:2-3 volunteer-to-inmate ratio. Inmates should do most of the talking, with volunteers speaking only enough to communicate that they are listening and to encourage continued discussions.

As volunteers listen to inmates with focused attention, this communicates that inmates have value. The Christian worldview is that God created people with value; sin separated us from God; and then Jesus rescued us to restore us to relationship with God. Many inmates never learned that they have value, which erects a barrier to receiving Jesus as Savior and being restored in relationship with God. Listening with focused attention communicates to inmates that they have value, paving the way to receiving Jesus as Savior and establishing a relationship with God.

### *What Yokefellow is NOT*

Because the focus of Yokefellow's ministry is communicating (through listening) that inmates have value, local Yokefellow groups do not engage in other common Christian activities, such as preaching the gospel or Bible study. (Yokefellow ministry is, by nature, relational evangelism. If an inmate initiates the topic, volunteers are encouraged to share the gospel and lead the inmate to Christ.) While these activities are good practices, they fall outside the scope of Yokefellow's ministry and should not take place in a local Yokefellow meeting. Volunteers who are interested in leading a Bible study for inmates or holding meetings that are evangelistic in nature should reach out to other prison ministries that engage in those activities at the local prison. Local Yokefellow meetings should not deviate from the sharing & listening structure as defined above.

### *Being a Good Guest in the Prison*

Always be mindful that Yokefellow volunteers are guests of the prison. The prison is under no obligation to continue this ministry. Thus, Yokefellow must always strive to develop and maintain good relationships with prison personnel. We must consider ourselves as members of a team and NOT operate alone.

## Importance of Listening

**The role of the volunteer is to listen** and guide the table discussion – “preaching Christ always and using words if necessary” (quote by St. Francis of Assisi). The discussion can be initiated by the introduction of a topic or by addressing a special concern of an inmate. A topic can be a subject taken from a Bible reading, or it can be of a general nature. Volunteers come from all Christian denominations, and the inmates come from various beliefs and religions. Hearing different religious disciplines can and will frustrate people; therefore, volunteers are asked to **leave your agendas at the door** when entering the meeting place. Please avoid arguments involving doctrines such as the rapture, forms of baptism, the dispensations, different forms of Christian religions, etc.

**Why a listening ministry?** A listening ministry allows the inmates to talk and relieve the frustration and pain in their lives, and it may induce a positive change in their behavior. All inmates have something to say: they just need someone to listen to them lovingly, without judgment or interruption. A Yokefellow volunteer does not give advice unless asked, and even then, it may be best to refer the inmate to the chaplain or a professional caregiver. Whenever we can, volunteers should encourage inmates to be the best they can be. Encourage them to exercise their minds as well as their bodies.

**What are we supposed to listen for?** We listen for truth expressed by an emotion, such as mad, sad, glad, or scared. We all express ourselves through one of these emotions by what we say or in our actions. Knowing where someone is coming from helps us to be caring, loving, and encouraging.

### *Developing a Listening Ear*

Listening is hard work. Most of us think about four times faster than we talk, and most people speak from 150 to 300 words per minute. However, we can hear from 400-1,000 words per minute. It is easy to let our minds wander while others are talking.

We can learn to be good listeners. Using our ears is a matter of attention and practice.

- 1) Maintain good eye contact.
- 2) Be natural and comfortable.
- 3) Refuse to be judgmental. Be accepting of others.
- 4) Learn to keep your wheels idle while the person is talking. Don't give answers to questions that are not being asked. We do not need to apply scripture to every problem. Keep your experiences to yourself, at least until there is an appropriate time to share. Let the person release his or her feelings first.

- 5) Listen creatively. Instead of focusing on your own interests, ask about the interests of others. (See Philippians 2:4.)
- 6) Give the person plenty of time to feel, think, and carefully choose his or her words.
- 7) Repeat back what the person tells you to make sure you understand his or her feelings clearly.
- 8) Practice, practice, practice.

### *Deepening the Conversation by Reflecting Feelings*

At Yokefellow meetings, the inmates guide the topic of the conversation while the volunteers actively listen. Volunteers can help deepen the conversation by summarizing what the inmate said and reflecting the feelings. Examples of ways to do this include...

- “What I am hearing you saying is [brief summary of what the inmate shared].”
- “It sounds like that made you angry.”
- “I would imagine that was frightening.”
- “I can see how that could make you feel sad.”

Brief summaries of what was said communicate that you have, in fact, been listening to what the inmate said. Reflecting feelings validates those emotions and invites inmates to go deeper, such as by expressing the underlying pain that is driving the anger.

### *Redirecting the Conversation*

As a general rule, the inmates guide the topic of the conversation while the volunteers actively listen. However, volunteers should not permit a Yokefellow meeting to turn into a complaint session, which is not constructive for the inmates or the volunteers. Negative conversations can be a way to avoid facing painful emotions and are draining rather than constructive. Instead, volunteers should use questions to redirect the conversation toward the inmates’ feelings. For example, if the inmates are complaining about the chaplain, ask how this makes them feel. The purpose of a Yokefellow meeting is for the inmate to experience “feeling heard,” not to criticize prison personnel.

### *Being the Living Word to Inmates*

Because Yokefellow is a Christian ministry, it can be tempting to incorporate discussions about the Bible into the conversations. Be mindful that Yokefellow is a *listening* ministry, not a Bible study. The role of a Yokefellow volunteer is not to explain the Bible to inmates. Instead, your role is to listen to whatever is burdening an inmate's heart. If an inmate is interested in having discussions about the Bible, many Bible studies are available for inmates from various sources. However, only Yokefellow provides a listening ministry. Therefore, volunteers should protect the sacred space of listening so that a Yokefellow meeting does not turn into a Bible study.

When Jesus talked with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-26), he did not carry a Torah with him. He was the Living Word and demonstrated who God is through his kindness to and acceptance of her. He provided an excellent example of being love in action as he applied God's Word to his interaction with her. Rather than opening a Bible to share what the Bible has to say, *be* the Bible to the inmates by applying it to the way you relate to the inmates.

## Building a Yokefellow Relationship

(Written and Presented at a Yokefellow Annual Meeting in October 1996, by David N. Canady)

The Yokefellow goal is that “each person will know and experience a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ.” Therefore, our efforts and energies are to assist inmates to developing this right relationship with God. As Yokefellows, our focus is on building relationships with others, and through this relationship of sharing and caring, we prepare the way for the ultimate experience of a person with the eternal God.

In Yokefellow meetings, it is common for inmates to raise questions about the Bible. They may take the form of questions regarding doctrine. One may ask, “What is your doctrine of authority, of sanctification, of the Holy Spirit and inspiration,” in addition to countless other questions. Clearly the answer to these questions is vital and important. However, for the Yokefellow, it is important to move beyond the teaching of doctrine and even a debate on the personal meaning of the question asked. A Yokefellow volunteer may respond to a question regarding a doctrine in the following way, “Why is this question important to you? How does this doctrine touch your life?” In asking questions like these, the focus is returned to the inmate, to assist him or her in struggling through and coming to a place of clarity and understanding for themselves.

The basic question that we need to ask ourselves is: “How do we establish a Yokefellow relationship?” It is important to note that a Yokefellow relationship is not primarily a teacher/student relationship. It is not primarily a counselor/client relationship. It is not primarily an authority/dependent relationship. Instead, it is the development of a caring, sharing, and mutual relationship. In order to answer this question of how we establish a Yokefellow relationship, it is important to come into this relationship with certain approaches.

The **first** approach is a caring attitude. It is important to know that whatever one brings to the Yokefellow relationship, the most important piece is care. It has been said of inmates that they do not care what you know until they know that you care.

The **second** approach that one brings is an attitude that I am a fellow pilgrim on the journey of life. This is an attitude that I meet the other person as a person. It is an attitude that we are yoked together to pull together and to work together on life’s problems and troubles, as well as sharing in life’s joys and victories. It is an attitude expressed in the old adage “there but by the grace of God, go I.” It is the attitude Jesus calls us to have in his “Sermon on the Mount” as he talked about removing the log from your eye before you begin to try to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye (Matt. 7:1-5). In this passage of scripture, it is important to note that an individual comes to a place in his life where he is working on taking out the log from his own eye. This means that he does not come in a judgmental way and does not view himself as better than, in control of, or authoritarian. It is clearly a process of being yoked together to face and to work through the difficulties that each person goes through.

The **third** approach is knowing that your involvement is for the sake of Christ. Since we belong to him, whatever we are about is for his sake. In this attitude one finds freedom, for we see ourselves as an instrument of his peace and as loving for his sake. This is crucial in ministering to inmates, for at times it is clear that we relate to persons who are unlovable, and they test our patience and love.

In the **fourth** approach, we need to bring an attitude that we cannot fix everything. There are life problems which we overcome. However, there are problems that we continue to work on, as well as others that continue to present themselves in relationships. We need not carry the burden of guilt whenever we expect to have everything fixed and straightened out, for this is unrealistic for ourselves and for those with whom we relate.

Closely related to these four approaches are the realities that need to be present to base a Yokefellow relationship upon. The following areas are noted:

- 1) Respect
- 2) Appreciation for the other
- 3) Compassion
- 4) Willingness to have such a relationship
- 5) Trust
- 6) Bring something to the relationship to give: it is imperative that we constantly be sensitive to self-care so that as we come to a Yokefellow relationship, we are able to bring something rather than expect our needs to be met.

How do we establish a Yokefellow relationship? In the simplest terms, we speak, and we listen. In any relationship, communication is essential, and that means having both a sender and a receiver of messages.

First, let us talk about active listening. Active listening is to understand the other person. This kind of listening is often described as empathy. This is an effort to understand what the other person is feeling, thinking, and experiencing. The old adage of “walking a mile in another person’s shoes” is a proper understanding of empathy. Listening is never easy. John Powell, a Catholic priest, points out that when we truly listen, we get outside of ourselves for we move into the life of the other person.

Not only do we listen, but we speak or respond. It is important that our responses are appropriate for the situation. Our responses need to reveal that we are in touch with the reality that the other person is presenting. How often have relationships been hampered or kept superficial by responses that are inappropriate? It is important in our responding that we reply out of honesty, which is wrapped in love. The words from the New Testament are “speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). It is also important that we ask appropriate questions. Moreover, we need not be afraid of hard questions that we may



be asked. There are appropriate responses to hard questions. First, one might say, "I don't know." When one does not know the answer, it is honest and helpful to state, "I don't know." One may follow this by saying, "I will find the answer out for you and bring it back next week." Should you promise such an answer, it is crucial that you follow through with your promise. A second response might be, "That's a very good question. Let me reflect on it for a minute and as I do, could you give me what your ideas are about the questions?" One might respond by saying, "In asking that question, I gather that you have been thinking about it. Could you share with the group what your thoughts are?" Another response might be to open this question up to the other group members and ask what their thoughts are. When a person asks me what makes prison ministry so meaningful, my response is:

*"First, I believe persons are called to prison ministry. I believe that a call is basic for us to deal with the struggles and the realness that shows itself in prison ministry. Secondly, the meaning that I find in prison ministry, has to do with inmates who are hungry for the gospel. It has been my experience that inmates who become hungry for the gospel are the hungriest of all the persons I know for spiritual matters."*

One example of the process I follow in relating to inmates is to ask the question, "How is your spiritual life?" Once this question has been asked, it has been my experience that inmates are quick to respond, for they expect the chaplain, as well as other religious volunteers, to listen. When discussing spiritual matters with inmates, it has become my practice to ask if they would like to pray before we separate. Approximately 98% of the inmates indicated that they would like to pray. My follow-up question is, "Would you like to pray first and let me close?" About 80-85% of the inmates indicate that they would like to pray, and this gives me an opportunity to express to the other 15% what prayer means and how one prays. As I pray with the inmates and they voice their concerns to God, I feel that I am on "holy ground." In this context of the inmate praying, it is my clear feeling that I am greatly privileged and blessed to have a part in assisting this individual to come into this ultimate and personal relationship with the eternal God.

## **How You Can Support Yokefellow**

In addition to volunteering weekly in a local prison, you can support Yokefellow in the following ways.

### *Keep Your Contact Information Current*

As a Yokefellow volunteer, you will receive periodic mailings from the Yokefellow Office, such as the newsletter, invitations to trainings, and other important announcements. To ensure you receive these mailings, the Yokefellow Office needs current contact information, including your full mailing address as well as your active email address, if applicable. Please send contact information changes to Staff at [info@yokefellowprisonministry.org](mailto:info@yokefellowprisonministry.org) or call 336-740-0392. Also, notify your Local Coordinator of changes.

To be good stewards of ministry funds, the Yokefellow Office will send your information via email if you have an email address on file, which saves the cost of supplies and postage. Please only provide an email address that you access regularly. Only volunteers without email addresses on file will receive paper mailings.

Please also notify both your Local Coordinator and the Executive Director if you resign as a volunteer or need to change your status to temporarily inactive (plan to miss at least one month of meetings). Those on temporarily inactive status will continue to receive mailings.

### *Encourage Others to Support Yokefellow*

As a volunteer, your enthusiasm is contagious! Encourage the people in your life to join you in prison ministry, such as through prayer, donations, or volunteering. Note that Yokefellow will joyfully accept in-kind (non-monetary) donations.

## **Thank You!**

Once again, thank you for all you do as a volunteer for Yokefellow! The Board of Directors, Staff, and Local Coordinators greatly appreciate all of the time and energy you put into serving in this capacity.

If you have any questions about this manual or Yokefellow policies in general, please email the Executive Director at [info@yokefellowprisonministry.org](mailto:info@yokefellowprisonministry.org) or call 336-740-0392. Remember that you are not alone – your Local Coordinator as well as Yokefellow Staff are available to support you as we all work together to grow this ministry and follow where God is leading.

## **Appendix A: Yokefellow Prison Ministry of North Carolina Volunteer Application Packet**

Thank you for your interest in volunteering with Yokefellow Prison Ministry of N.C., Inc. We appreciate your interest and look forward to learning more about you.

All volunteers with Yokefellow Prison Ministry are required to submit a completed volunteer application packet to the Yokefellow Prison Ministry office before they will be approved to volunteer with a local Yokefellow group. The volunteer application packet includes the following documents:

- **Volunteer Application Form** – Completed, signed, and dated by the applicant and submitted to the Yokefellow Prison Ministry office
- **Letter of Good Standing** – Completed, signed, and dated by someone who can verify the applicant's good standing in the Christian faith, such as a pastor, Bible study leader, or equivalent and submitted directly to the Yokefellow Prison Ministry office
- **Two Letters of Recommendation** – Completed, signed, and dated by two non-family members and submitted directly to the Yokefellow Prison Ministry office

The Volunteer Application Form, Letter of Good Standing, and Letters of Recommendation should be submitted to the Yokefellow Prison Ministry office using one of the following methods:

- **Email:** [info@yokefellowprisonministry.org](mailto:info@yokefellowprisonministry.org)
- **Fax:** 336-370-6321
- **Mail:** P.O. Box 38964, Greensboro, NC 27438

Call (336) 740-0392 with questions about the volunteer application process. To learn more about the ministry, visit our website at <http://www.yokefellowprisonministry.org>.

Thank you again for your interest!

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## Yokefellow Prison Ministry of North Carolina Volunteer Application Form

This form should be completed, signed, and dated by the **applicant** and then submitted to the Yokefellow Prison Ministry office using one of the following methods:

- **Email:** info@yokefellowprisonministry.org
- **Fax:** 336-370-6321
- **Mail:** P.O. Box 38964, Greensboro, NC 27438

Call (336) 740-0392 with questions about completing this form.

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### Basic Information

Full Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

(City) \_\_\_\_\_ (State) \_\_\_\_\_ (Zip Code) \_\_\_\_\_

Daytime Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Cell Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Evening Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_ Male: \_\_\_\_\_ Female: \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have any medical conditions or disabilities that may restrict your volunteer services? If yes, please specify. \_\_\_\_\_

Have you ever been incarcerated? If yes, how long ago? \_\_\_\_\_

Emergency Contact Information:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

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### Volunteer Interest

Why are you interested in volunteering with a Christian prison ministry? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Which prison(s) are you interested in volunteering with? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Have you ever volunteered with a prison ministry or do you have other related experience? If yes, share details. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Yokefellow Prison Ministry of N.C., Inc. is a Christian interdenominational and racially-diverse prison ministry. Do you have any concerns about volunteering for a ministry with this focus? If yes, please share your concerns. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

To be approved as a volunteer, applicants must complete training for Yokefellow Prison Ministry of N.C., Inc. as well as for the local prison. To complete the Yokefellow Prison Ministry training, applicants may choose to attend one of the live training sessions offered in different parts of the state throughout the year or to complete the training online. To be approved to volunteer in a local prison, the applicant must follow the instructions provided by prison personnel, which include submitting to a background check and completing the training provided by the prison. Applicants will be unable to volunteer for Yokefellow Prison Ministry until both trainings are completed.

I have read and understand the information provided in this volunteer application form and agree that I will not attempt to volunteer in a local prison for Yokefellow until I have completed all training requirements for Yokefellow Prison Ministry of N.C., Inc. and the local prison. I certify to the best of my knowledge and belief that all statements in this volunteer application form are true, correct, complete, and made in good faith.

Applicant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Yokefellow Prison Ministry of North Carolina Letter of Good Standing

### For the Applicant

Because Yokefellow Prison Ministry of N.C., Inc. is a Christian ministry, volunteers are required to be active within the Body of Christ, such as with a church or ministry, before applying to volunteer. Call (336) 740-0392 with questions about this policy.

Complete the following information and then give this completed form to the leader of your local group for submission to Yokefellow.

Applicant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Church or Group Name: \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you been active in this local church or group? \_\_\_\_\_

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### For the Pastor or Group Leader

The above-named applicant has applied to volunteer with Yokefellow Prison Ministry of N.C., Inc., which is a Christian interdenominational and racially-diverse prison ministry. To learn more about this ministry, please visit the website at [yokefellowprisonministry.org](http://yokefellowprisonministry.org).

Because Yokefellow is a Christian ministry, volunteers are required to be active within the Body of Christ, such as with a church or ministry. Please write a letter of good standing on behalf of the above-named applicant. In this letter, address how long the applicant has been active in your local church or group, whether you believe the applicant would be a good fit for a prison ministry, and why you believe this. Sign and date the letter and then submit the letter and this form directly to the Yokefellow Prison Ministry office using one of the following methods:

- **Email:** [info@yokefellowprisonministry.org](mailto:info@yokefellowprisonministry.org)
- **Fax:** 336-370-6321
- **Mail:** P.O. Box 38964, Greensboro, NC 27438

Call (336) 740-0392 with questions about completing and submitting a letter of good standing.

**Your letter of good standing will be kept confidential.** Because the applicant will be interacting with inmates, Yokefellow needs to ensure that the applicant is a good fit for this ministry. Please be candid to assist Yokefellow in making this assessment. Thank you for taking the time to complete a letter of good standing on behalf of the applicant.

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## Yokefellow Prison Ministry of North Carolina Letter of Recommendation

### For the Applicant

Yokefellow Prison Ministry of N.C., Inc. requires two letters of recommendation from non-family members before an applicant may be approved to volunteer in a prison. References must have known you for at least six months. Call (336) 740-0392 with questions about this policy.

Complete the following information and then give this completed form to two references for submission to Yokefellow.

Applicant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Reference's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you known each other? \_\_\_\_\_

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Call (336) 740-0392 with questions about completing and submitting your letter.

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**Building Trusting Relationships**  
**Listening • Caring • Encouraging**

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[www.yokefellowprisonministry.org](http://www.yokefellowprisonministry.org)