

NETWORKING IS ESSENTIAL

By Buck Griffith

What do we mean when we say that *net-working is essential*? We speak of *networking* when it comes to the efficient management of office equipment in growing businesses. Franchise *networking* is critical in taking advantage of a brand name, advertising, marketing, etc. In this day of increasing numbers of medical specialists in the health field, it is important for a primary care physician to know who is on 1st base, 2nd base and so forth.

In the case of a jail and/or prison ministry, *networking* means connecting with other people in other places and utilizing more tools, agencies, and organizations in order to accomplish your goals. We “use” each other to reach desired destinations. In small ministries, most seek to do what they do in *Lone Ranger* fashion. It usually indicates a smaller vision, lacking a view of the bigger picture. From where some stand at the moment, they simply cannot see any further down the road. For far too long, this work has suffered when a *Lone Ranger* refused to change and when he died – the ministry died! Hopefully, as the work grows, eyes open wider.

If the ministry grows and most *will . . .* they will come to realize their limitations. They cannot do everything that needs to be done – alone. Then, they must make a decision about connecting or *networking*.

First, the “Fields” Are Different

Each specific “field” has unique needs and must be pursued differently. Such fields include . . .

<i>Juvenile Detention Facilities</i>	<i>Deportation Centers</i>
<i>Juvenile Probation</i>	<i>Death Rows</i>
<i>County Jails</i>	<i>Work Release Facilities</i>
<i>Restitution Centers</i>	<i>Probationers</i>
<i>State Prisons</i>	<i>Parolees</i>
<i>Private Prisons</i>	<i>Halfway House Residents</i>
<i>Federal Prisons</i>	<i>Alcohol/Drug Treatment Facilities</i>

Obviously, a congregation just getting up and going with a ministry cannot be in all these places simultaneously. Plus, males need to work with male offenders while ladies minister to ladies. Trying to be in too many places at the same time will drive you *nuts!* Such is the path to an early grave or at the least . . . *burn-out!* Thus, you must first decide on which “field” you want to focus on and male or female or both. Then, you will want to determine on specific methods, tools and approaches you will employ, depending on your personal skills and those of other volunteers.

Specific Ways of Involvement

In the beginning of a ministry you will likely select one or two roles with a limited work force. As it grows, you can take on more as you gain more workers. Faithful with a little, God will open more and more doors. In time, a ministry can become large enough that you can increase the scope of your mission . . .

<i>Teaching offenders one-on-one</i>	<i>Halfway houses</i>
<i>Teaching offenders in a class</i>	<i>Community housing</i>
<i>Teaching in a formal worship</i>	<i>Job searches</i>
<i>Teaching children of offenders</i>	<i>Transportation needs</i>
<i>Leading song services</i>	<i>Clothing needs</i>
<i>Praying for offenders</i>	<i>Furniture needs</i>
<i>Baptizing offenders</i>	<i>Food needs</i>
<i>Following up on new believers</i>	<i>Medical needs</i>
<i>Writing to offenders</i>	<i>Dental needs</i>
<i>Mentoring</i>	<i>Vision needs</i>
<i>Twelve Step Recovery</i>	<i>Counseling needs – offenders</i>
<i>FamilyNet - Family Ministering</i>	<i>Counseling needs – spouses</i>
<i>Bible Correspondence Ministry</i>	<i>Counseling needs – children</i>
<i>Aftercare</i>	<i>Counseling needs – parents</i>

Doing all the above requires a lot of effort from an ever growing number of workers. First, we crawl and later we . . . walk, run, and jump. We determine how we will *first* become involved and then . . . *network* with others, each of which has a mission different from our own. In some instances, we may find others that do a superior job in their area of expertise and we never want to replace them.

What Is First?

Most of us are primarily interested in the saving of souls. This being true, we seek to be those “teaching” offenders and ex-offenders. We reason that souls can go to Heaven poorly dressed, smelling gross and penniless. But outside of Christ, souls can go to Hell in \$1,000 suits or driving a *Mercedes-Benz – convertible (red)!* This means we need to locate other persons, programs and agencies in our community that already offer assistance in areas of concern *outside the realm of teaching the basic principles of New Testament Christianity.*

Networking Sources

For instance, it is expensive to own and operate a residence for those coming out of prison. Several such facilities exist in most urban areas. You should visit and develop a healthy relationship with their staff. Let them know of your availability to help residents. You may immediately be invited to teach a weekly Bible class! Later, you may be able to get a bed there for a promising person you have been working with that needs a place to stay upon release.

Other programs such as “Project Rio” exist in most states to help ex-offenders find gainful employment. This includes tax write-offs for businesses hiring felons. Participants, however, need to make contact with the program prior to and immediate upon release. Otherwise, they are *on their own*. You need a strong connection with local judges, city police and those connected with the county jail. Do the same with the probation and parole departments. Know your elected officials and city fathers. These liaisons open doors. In a similar manner, contact food suppliers (such as Food Bank, Wal-Mart, etc.) and clothing, furniture and appliance outlets. *Dress for Success* helps

females getting ready for more successful job interviews.

Find economical places that do good and dependable automotive repair work. Be careful not to take advantage of or abuse the connections you make around town. Work will be done to assist ex-offenders or family members based on the trust *you* have established with these vendors.

National Directory – Baptistries Around the World

The *National Directory of Churches of Christ & Individual Christians Involved in Jail-Prison Ministries* is a very helpful tool. It is used to locate fellow workers in other geographical areas and states who are trying to do in their community what you are trying to do in your community. You need to *network* together.

It is important for *you* and your home congregation to also be listed in this *directory*. Then, others will be able to contact *you* when they have contacts coming into your area. This includes not only prisoners and ex-offenders but their family members. Together, we can form a strong and powerful *network*. There are now over 965 churches of Christ and 2,160 individual Christians that have been identified as “involved” in jail-prison ministries in the USA. If you find new contacts or *more recent contact information*, you can help everyone else by notifying us of these details. The directory is updated on a daily basis. We also maintain an active list of aftercare programs throughout the USA that are operated by churches of Christ.

Many states maintain an active list of its prisons and workers in the nearest local congregations who can be contacted for follow-up. They submit annual updates for the *National Directory*. A free CD of the *National Directory* is available to those attending the annual *National Jail-Prison Ministry Workshop* (scheduled during the second week of June). The workshop moves across the nation to give everyone *everywhere* an opportunity to attend a conference when in their area.

Of course, one of the greatest needs to *network* is when we have a contact in some area needing assistance in being baptized or . . . released and looking for a good congregation with which to work and worship.

Baptistries Around the World is another program in churches of Christ to assist in getting baptisteries placed in jails and prisons to eliminate the excuse made too often to deny immersion – “We do not have the facilities here to accommodate immersions.” This is just one more reason we need to coordinate our efforts in carrying out the Great Commission. Alone, we are extremely limited. United, we can do so much more.

Remember: Network!