**Juvenile Institutional Ministries**

**Bible Discussion Sheets**

**VOLUME II**

# By Scott and Hanne Larson

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**FORWARD**

This manual provides some basic material we have used in conducting Bible discussion groups for incarcerated youth in juvenile institutions. It is not intended to be a complete work, but rather merely an outline from which one can begin. Although this material is geared more for groups, it is easily adaptable for use with individuals on a one-to-one basis.

The meetings work best in a group of up to fifteen youth in one-hour sessions. Discussions are topical and cover such subjects as friendship, habits, hurts, love, self-image, anger, making decisions, etc. (See “Table of Contents” for complete listing). Ground rules for each meeting should be set and should include:

1. One person speaks at a time.
2. Each person’s opinion is respected.
3. No one in the group is allowed to talk about people who aren’t there.

The format of each meeting generally consists of:

* Opening Discussion: To solicit general conversation on the topic and create a non-threatening environment where it’s clear that all input is welcomed and appreciated. The discussion should lead toward creating a “question” or “problem” that is common to all. The conclusion reached by the youth being “I can’t handle this area of my life on my own.”
* Story: This serves to further state the problem illustrated in the opening discussion. It helps create the need for a solution.

Scripture: Here is where the solution is introduced.

* Wrap-up: This is where the leader transitions from an open discussion format into one of bringing the meeting to a close. Be sure to re-emphasize Scripture’s answer to the problem/question, which was introduced in the opening discussion, and how God can help us deal with that area of our lives. Close by asking for prayer requests, and then by praying.

Ministering to juvenile offenders in institutions is an exciting and specialized ministry. We encourage you to read thoroughly the Orientation Manual included in the Appendix following the Bible discussion sheets, before launching such a ministry.

 Scott & Hanne Larson, Founders

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 1

TOPIC: Anger

## Opening Discussion

* Tell of a time that you were really angry or use an illustration of someone who was extremely angry.
* Have any of you ever gotten angry like that? What happened?
* What types of things really get you mad?
* How do you react when you get really mad?
* What does it feel like when you get really angry?
* Does anyone know what your body does when you get really angry? (Your blood pressure goes up; your adrenaline increases; blood flows to your head; your heart rate increases.)
* Do you think differently when you are angry? (When these things happen it shuts off the logical brain area which is where you think and reason things out)
* What can cause anger? (fatigue, embarrassment, frustration, rejection, self-centeredness, hate, etc.)
* Is all anger harmful? Why, or why not?

## Scripture

 Read Ephesians 4:25-32

* When does getting angry become harmful? What’s the line?
* What does it mean not to “give the devil a foothold?”
* gone to bed angry? Have you ever What happens? (You never resolve the problem, so the next time you have a conflict with that person, you get even more angry because you haven’t resolved the last problem)
* (If time allows, have the kids read from Practical Advice for Dealing with Anger and discuss them)

**Wrap-up**

* Anger becomes harmful when we replay it over and over, plotting revenge, or when we act out in violence or hatred. We can only truly get over our anger when we work through it and get to the bottom of it. God will help us with our anger! Pray to God, ask for help, and see what happens. If a situation comes up that will get you angry and could lead to trouble, pray about it. It does not have to be a long prayer; you can even pray “*Lord, help me with this.*” That will give you a few seconds to think before you act out in a wrong way.

**PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR DEALING WITH ANGER**

## Romans 12:19-21

Dear Friends, don’t try to get even. Let God take revenge. In the Scriptures the Lord says, “I am the one to take revenge and pay them back.” The Scriptures also say, “If your enemies are hungry, give them something to eat. And if they are thirsty, give them something to drink. This will be the same as piling burning coals on their heads.” Don’t let evil defeat you, but defeat evil with good.

## James 1:19

My dear friends, you should be quick to listen and slow to speak or to get angry.

## James 1:20

If you are angry, you cannot do any of the good things that God wants done.

## Matthew 5:43-45

You have heard people say, “Love your neighbors and hate your enemies.” But I tell you to love your enemies and pray for anyone who mistreats you. Then you will be acting like your Father in heaven . . .

## Proverbs 15:1

A kind answer soothes angry feelings, but harsh words stir them up.

## Proverbs 29:11

Don’t be a fool and quickly lose your temper – be sensible and patient.

## Proverbs 29:22

A person with a quick temper stirs up arguments and commits a lot of sins.

## Proverbs 30:33

If you churn milk, you get butter; if you pound your nose you get blood – and if you stay angry, you get in trouble.

1. Make the irritation a matter of prayer, ask God for help.
2. Explain feelings of anger to someone you trust whose advice you can listen to.
3. Go to the person who gets you angry and show forgiveness. They might not always accept it or change, but you will feel better because you have obeyed God.
4. Understand that God uses frustrating events to mold us into better, more mature people.

TOPIC: Being a Follower

## Purpose

To show kids that following Jesus and His path is the way to have true peace in life.

## Opening Discussion

* Have you ever liked or admired someone so much that you wanted to follow them around and do what they do?
* Did you ever follow someone in doing something that got you into trouble?
* Why did you follow that person? Did you regret your choice to follow them?
* How about the opposite: have you ever followed someone who helped you stay positive, even if that was hard? Why did you do that?

## Scripture

* Read Matthew 4:18-25
	+ Why do you think these people followed Jesus? What did they see in him that was different?
	+ What did they leave behind?
* Read Matthew 9:9-13
	+ Who did Jesus say he came to invite as His followers? What does it mean to be a “sinner” (someone who messes up)? Who sins/messes up?
	+ Why would Jesus invite such outsiders to become his followers?
* Read Luke 9:23-25
	+ What do you think Jesus means when He says that if you want to keep your life for yourself, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for me you will find true life?
	+ Have you ever had to give something up in order to have something better?
	+ Why do you think Jesus wants us to follow Him? (He loves us and has the best plan for each of our lives; He knows the best way; He knows what will help or harm us.)
* Read Jeremiah 29:11; Proverbs 4:11-19

## Wrap-up

* There are many people and many paths that we may choose to follow in our lives, but Jesus wants you to follow him because he loves you and cares about you. Follow Jesus and he promises he’ll never leave you or forget you.

TOPIC: Choices

## Opening Discussion

* Do you like situations where you have to make choices? Why or why not?
* Have you had to make an important choice or decision today? What was it?
* What are some things that can make a difference between making a good choice or a bad choice?
* When you made a bad choice, did you think about the possible consequences?
* God always allows us to make decisions. Do you think God can help you make a good choice? How?

## Scripture

* Tell the story of Jonah in the Bible or, if you have time, read it.
	+ What did God ask Jonah to do? Why?
	+ What was Jonah’s reaction? Why?
	+ What were the consequences of his decision?
	+ Why did God give Jonah a second chance?
* Additional scripture:

Proverbs 3:5,6; 8:8-11

James 1:5

**Story**

Read the story of John Newton

## Wrap-up

We are given many choices to make each day. God can help to guide us with those choices. Jonah and John Newton had to learn the hard way, but they learned. The biggest choice that we have to make is whether we are going to listen to God and follow Him. When we do, God guides us, forgives us, frees us from guilt and gives us eternal life.

### The Story of John Newton

 At age eleven, John Newton started training to be a sailor. His father expected him to be a royal officer in the English Navy. He chose to go his own way.

 John got into bad company, was continually punished, and was demoted. When he was twenty-one, he saw a way to get rich. He went to Africa and began buying and selling slaves. John knew who God was but did not believe or follow Him.

 One day John openly made fun of a book about Jesus. Just as he was doing that, a bad storm came up and his ship began filling up with water. Part of the ship collapsed, and John started pumping water out. After eleven hours of trying to save the ship, he and his crew gave up. Just then he decided to call upon God, threw himself down to the deck and pleaded with God for safety, “God have mercy on us all.”

 John and his ship survived. After that, John made the choice to follow Jesus. Back in England, he stopped trading in slaves, started writing hymns, and began to tell others about Jesus. One of his many hymns was “Amazing Grace,” which is still one of the most popular Christian songs.

 In his old age, John’s friends told him to give up and retire. John replied, “My memory may be gone, but I remember two things: I am a great sinner, and Jesus is a great Savior.”

TOPIC: Christmas

## Opening Discussion

* When you think about Christmas, what are things that come to your mind?
* What is Christmas about? Why do we celebrate it?
* Have you ever received a special gift for Christmas?
* What made it special?
* Did it have anything to do with who it was from?
* How did it make you feel?

## Attention-getter

* Read the story, “A Conversation in Heaven”

## Scripture

* Read Luke 2:1-20
* What was God’s gift to us?
* Why do you think the angel went to the shepherds to let them know, and not to the leaders?

* Read John 3:16

 What was the reason He gave us the gift of His Son?

* God gave this gift to everyone. Do you think everyone has received it?
* How do you think God would want you to receive His Christmas gift to you?

## Wrap-up

This Christmas you could receive the most special gift you ever received. Like all gifts, we have the choice to accept it or not. God loves you and wants you to know that love!

### A Conversation in Heaven

 Once a very young angel was being shown round the splendors and glories of the universes by a senior and experienced angel. To tell the truth, the little angel was beginning to be tired and a little bored.

 As the two of them drew near to the star which we call our sun and to its circling planets, the senior angel pointed to a small and rather insignificant sphere turning very slowly on its axis. It looked as dull as a dirty tennis ball to the little angel, whose mind was filled with the size and glory of what he had seen.

 “I want you to watch that one particularly,” said the senior angel, pointing with his finger.

 “Well, it looks very small and rather dirty to me,” said the little angel. “What’s special about that one?”

 “That,” replied his senior, “is the Visited Planet.”

 “Visited? You don’t mean visited by . . .?”

 “Indeed, I do. That ball has been visited by our young Prince of Glory.” And he bowed his head reverently.

 “But how?” queried the younger one. “Do you mean that our great and glorious Prince, with all these wonders and splendors of his creation, and millions more that I’m sure I haven’t seen yet, went down in person to this fifth-rate little planet? Why should he do a thing like that?”

 “It isn’t for us,” said his senior a little stiffly, “to question his ‘why’s,’ except that he is not impressed by size and numbers, as you seem to be. As to why he became one of them – how else do you suppose he could visit them?”

 The little angel’s face wrinkled in disgust.

 “Do you mean to tell me,” he said, “that he stooped so low as to become one of those creeping, crawling creatures on that floating ball?”

 “I do, and I don’t think he would like you to call them ‘creeping, crawling creatures’ in that tone of voice. For, strange as it may seem to us, he loves them. He went down to visit them to lift them up to become like him.”

Taken from “New Testament Christianity” by J.B. Phillips, ©1956 by Hodder and Stoughton, Ltd.

TOPIC: Counterfeits

## Opening Discussion

* What is a counterfeit?

(Example: Show a new $20 bill and explain that it is supposed to be quite impossible to duplicate or copy. It’s made with special paper, has a different design from the old bill, and you can see an image when you hold it up to the light. Yet someone will try to imitate it. We are confronted with fakes and phonies all the time. Show a fake or play bill, if you have one.)

* What are some of the ways people are fooled or deceived?
* Does it happen a lot today?
* Why do people fall for scams?
* Have you ever been scammed or misled? How?

**Story**

 Read Marc’s story

* How was Marc misled?
* How did what he think joining the gang would bring differ from what he got?
* What did he end up with?

## Scripture

* God has promised us good things, but many try to deceive us into thinking we should do what we feel. Read Genesis Chapter 3
* God had told the man and woman they could eat from every tree, except from the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (if they ate from it, they would try to know everything).
* What did the serpent tell them? What was different about that then what God had said?
* Why would they want to eat that fruit? (to become like God).
* What was the result?

## Wrap-up

God wants us to have a good, full life and we can have that by knowing God and following his design for our lives. It comes down to loving God and loving others. When we do that, we are closer to God.

**Marc’s Story**

 Marc (not his real name) had just joined a gang. He did it for logical reasons. He wanted acceptance and a sense of power. He wanted to belong to something; and in his neighborhood you had to be in a gang if you really wanted to go places. Besides, the gang he was a part of never did really bad things anyway. It was more for protection from others who were *really* bad.

 One day, Marc’s gang was playing basketball in the neighborhood. Marc had sprained his ankle so he couldn’t play. He was sitting on the sideline next to several of the guns owned by his friends. Suddenly a rival gang came over the hill and someone with a knife came running toward Marc. Out of instinct, Marc grabbed one of the guns and shot the kid in the chest.

 Everybody ran. A couple of days later Marc was arrested . . . for murder. The kid had died.

 Now as he sits in detention, he re-thinks the situation – over and over and over. He never expected that this would have happened to him. Joining the gang just seemed like the logical thing to do. Now he feels he’s been ripped off.

Scott and Hanne Larson met Marc while he was locked up in a detention center in Massachusetts.

TOPIC: Dealing With Your Enemies

## Opening Discussion

* What are some reasons people become enemies?
* Do you think anyone views you as an enemy?
* How many enemies do you think you have?
* What are some ways you treat your enemies? Why?
* What would happen if you treated your enemies like they were your friends?

## Scripture

* Read Matthew 5:43-47 (love your enemies, bless those who curse you)
* Why do you think Jesus told his friends to do that?
* Read 1 Samuel 18:6-9
* What was it that made Saul consider David his enemy?
* Read 1 Samuel 24:1-11
* How did Saul deal with his enemy?
* If you were in David’s shoes, how would you have viewed Saul?
* Do you think David considered Saul his enemy?
* What do you think helped David not see him as an enemy?
* How do you think this incident affected Saul’s feelings about David?
* Read 1 Samuel 26:2-25
* What do you think you would have done now that Saul came after you a second time?
* Do you think you would have been affected by your friend wanting you to hurt him?
* Have your friends ever persuaded you to do something you didn’t want to do?
* How do you think the way Saul and David viewed and treated their enemy affected their lives?
* Read 2 Samuel 1:1-12
* How do you think you would have responded to the news about Saul’s death?
* How do you think David’s life would have turned out differently if he had killed Saul when he had a chance?
* What did David gain by responding to his enemy the way he did?

## Wrap-up

* If we try to deal with our enemies by getting back at them, we build up a lot of anger and resentment and usually end up hurting ourselves in the process. If we treat our enemies the way Jesus said to, and the way David did, we will be free from all the hate and anger and can leave room for God to deal with them.

TOPIC: Faith

## Attention-getter

* Read “The Wheelbarrow”

## Opening Discussion

* Would you have gotten into the wheelbarrow? Why? Why not?
* Did the man who was watching believe that the tightrope walker could make it across again with a person in the wheelbarrow?
* Then why didn’t he get in? (he did not trust him)
* What’s the difference between believing something and trusting something?
* Here’s an example: when you came in the room did you believe that the seat/couch was there? Why? Because you saw it. How did you show that you trusted it? (you sat on it and trusted that it would hold you).

## Scripture

* Read and discuss Mark 5:21-42 (the woman with hemorrhage; Jairus)
* Why did the woman reach out to Jesus? What did Jesus do for her?
* Many people were brushing against Jesus as He went along. Why did His healing power only touch that woman? What made her different?
* What was Jesus’ reaction to her?
* What did He tell her was the reason she got well?
* What did Jairus want to do? Why did Jesus go with him?
* What did the people do when Jesus said that the little girl was sleeping? (laughed at him)
* What did that show about their belief? Was that different than what Jairus believed?
* Are there things you know about God and believe are true, but you are still not up for trusting him with your life?

## Wrap-up

God is inviting us to trust Him. To not only know He can make a difference in someone’s life, He’s inviting you to trust him with your life.

### The Wheelbarrow

A man was taking a walk by Niagara Falls when he noticed another man walking on a tightrope that was strung high across the falls. He watched as the man walked across the rope. Then he saw the man go back to the other side, this time pushing a wheelbarrow. Then he saw the man put a couple of sandbags in the wheelbarrow and walk across yet again.

The man who was watching got so excited that he went up to the tightrope walker and said, “That was great, do it again!”

The tightrope walker asked the man, “Do you believe that I can make it across the river with those 200-pound sandbags again?”

“Of course,” the man replied. “I saw you do it before.”

“Do you believe that I could make it across the river again with a person in the wheelbarrow instead of sandbags?”

“Of course,” the man replied, “It would be just like the sandbags.”

Then the tightrope walker said, “Get in.”

TOPIC: Giving Up

## Opening Discussion

* What kinds of things happen to people that cause them to give up?
* Do you know someone who seemingly gave up on life?
* What are some things people do when they give up?
* Have you ever been at a place in your life when you wanted to give up? What happened?

## Attention-getter

* Read about Nicky Cruz (next page)
* What did Nicky mean when he said, “My soul was dead, and my body was just waiting to catch up.”
* How did that make him so dangerous?

## Scripture

* Read Mark 14:10, 43-45 (Fill in the story so they understand what’s going on.)
* How do you think you would have felt if you were Judas?
* Read Mark 14:27-31, 66-72
* How do you think Peter felt?
* Read Matthew 27:3-5
* What do you think made Judas do what he did?
* Could he have gone back to Jesus to seek forgiveness? Why didn’t he? (he tried to take care of his guilt his own way).
* Read John 21:1-17 (Tell what happened with Peter, how he became the head of the church.)
* What made Peter able to bounce back?
* What was the difference between Judas and Peter?
* When you are tempted to give up, how can turning to Jesus help you keep going?

## Wrap-up

We all mess up. The difference comes in what we do with the “mess-ups.” When we give up, like Judas, it’s all over. But when we come back to Jesus like Peter did, God can turn that bad situation into something good (Romans 8:28). He’s always willing to forgive us and give us a new start again.

### Nicky Cruz

 Nicky Cruz, the much-feared New York City gang member in the 1950’s, tells how he “died” when he was twelve years old – not physically, but inside.

 “My mother was into witchcraft. One day she told me I was the son of the devil, and she never wanted to see me again. It hurt me so much that I left my home in Puerto Rico and moved by myself to the streets of New York City. But when I got there, I had given up on life. Inside, my soul was dead, and my body was just waiting to catch up. I didn’t care about anything or anyone. I didn’t care if I lived or died. I guess that’s what made me so dangerous.”

TOPIC: God is Dependable

## Opening Discussion

* What does it mean to be dependable? (faithful, there for you)
* Do you know anyone in your life who is dependable? How are they dependable?
* Have they ever disappointed you, even if they didn’t mean to?
* Have you ever been undependable to people in your life? To yourself?

## Scripture

* When people let us down, it’s hard to trust others, and it can even be hard to trust God. Why should we trust God? One reason is God makes promises that are kept:
* Jesus knew what it was like to have people he loved let him down, but he still loved them:
* Read John 13:36-38; 18:15-18, 25-27 (Peter denies knowing Jesus).
* Here’s a promise: Romans 8:38-39 What does God promise? (to love us)
* Here’s another one: 1 John 1:9 And that promise is what? (forgives us)
* Have you ever felt all alone and deserted? Deuteronomy 31:8; Joshua 1:9 What’s the promise here? (God is always with you.)
* Read Hebrews 13:5; Matthew 6:25-34 (He will always take care of us.)
* Read Hebrews 10:23; Psalm 145:13
* What do these verses say about God?

## Wrap-up

Unlike ourselves and other people, God is completely dependable (faithful). He will never let us down (break a promise). Therefore, we can always trust and know that God’s ways are the best for us; they may not seem that way at times, but God even takes things that are painful and can use them for good. So don’t give up!

TOPIC: Good Foundations

## Opening Discussion

* What is your house or apartment building made out of?
* How heavy is it? What holds all of that weight up? (the foundation)
* What does a foundation do? (supports the whole building)
* What would happen if that foundation were made of sand?
* Have you ever seen pictures on the news of houses after a hurricane, or beach houses after a storm? What is left? (foundations)

**Scripture**

* Read Luke 6:46-49 (ask kids to summarize)
* What does Jesus say the problem is in verse 46?
* What are some of the things that Jesus says we are to do? (trust Him, have faith in Him, respect others, respect ourselves)
* What are some weak things that we can build our lives on? (money, other people)
* Jesus says those things are like what? (sand)
* How strong are those things? Why?
* What happens when storms or troubles come?
* What is the strongest thing you could build your life on? (God, because He is always there)
* What does Jesus say that foundation is made of?
* Will there always be storms/troubles in our lives even if we believe in God? What happens?

## Wrap-up

* We’re all going to face troubles in our lives, buy when we have Jesus as our foundation, we can make it through anything. To do that, we need to love Him and to trust Him. Jesus tells us that He will never leave us or give up on us when we build our lives upon Him. The storms will come. What are you going to build your life on?

TOPIC: Happiness

## Opening Discussion

* What does the word “happiness” mean to you?
* The dictionary defines it as: joy, extreme gladness, satisfied state, etc.
* What’s contentment or to be content mean?
* In what ways are happiness and contentment the same, and in what ways are they different?

## Scripture

* What things make people happy? Can you think of a special time when you were especially happy? Proverbs 15:13 says happiness makes you smile.
* What would make you happy? Right now, or in the future? Do you think God wants you to be happy?
* Read Psalm 1. (discuss)
* What might stand in the way of your being happy?
* Is happiness a good goal to have?
* Philippians 4:10-13
* Paul was content through endless suffering. Why? (He knew Jesus was always with him)
* 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18- How can being thankful lead to, us being joyful?

## Wrap-up

God wants you to be happy, but He knows best what will make you happy. What are you thankful for? How can you be more content this next week?

TOPIC: Seeking and Finding Forgiveness

**Opening Discussion**

What do you think it would be like to be a King?

What are some of the things you would do with your power?

What would be hard about having so much power?

**Scripture**

There was a great king in the Bible named David, who at times thought he could use his power to get or do whatever he wanted. Let’s see what happened when he abused his power.

Read 2 Samuel 11:1-5

What was the problem with what David did?

Now David needs to try to cover it up:

Plan A: Read 2 Samuel 11:6-11

What was David’s plan? How did it work?

Plan B: Read 2 Samuel 11:12-13

What was David’s plan? How did it work?

Plan C: Read 2 Samuel 11:14-27

What was David’s plan? How did it work?

How do you think David was feeling?

Read 2 Samuel 12:1-9 (Talk about what Nathan’s story meant and how David responded.)

What was David’s first reaction? What happened when he understood Nathan was talking about him? How could David have responded?

Read Psalm 51 (Include an introduction about what it means to repent.)

Do you think David was sincere? How do you know?

How do you think God would react to us if we came to him like David?

Do you think you could go to God now, if you have some things you want to turn away from? How will God react?

**Wrap-up**

God restored His relationship with David where God called David a friend of God. God wants to do the same for us. There is nothing God won’t forgive, if we are willing to be open and honest.

TOPIC: Lies

**Opening Discussion**

Is it easier to lie or to tell the truth when we do something wrong? Why?

Name some times that you or someone you know did not tell the truth.

What are some problems that result from lying?

If someone lies to you, what do you think about that person? Does it affect your relationship?

The Bible says, “Let your yes be yes, and your no be no.” (James 5:12) What does that mean?

**Scripture**

Read Daniel 6 (discuss)

What did Daniel do when he heard about the law? (he prayed)

Why was Daniel thrown into the pit of lions?

Could Daniel have lied and said that he was not praying?

Wouldn’t that have been easier for Daniel to do?

Why didn’t he take the easy road?

What did God do for Daniel? Why?

What was the result? (he worshiped God and things went well for him)

**Wrap-up**

Telling the truth can be hard at times, especially when we think we’ll suffer the consequences when the truth is known. But when we lie there are *always* consequences. Sometimes it seems like we get away with it, but like a snowball rolling down a hill, a lie gets bigger and more destructive. Start today: Ask God to help you to be a truthful person. Others will see a difference in you and others will begin to trust you and you will also build trust for yourself.

TOPIC: Making Things Right

**Opening Discussion**

Can you think of a time when you wronged someone, and you were able to go back and make it right?

What was the response of the other person? How did it make you feel?

What are some things that make it hard to own up to what you’ve done and to make it right?

How does it affect your life when you are not able to make things right?

**Scripture**

Read Luke 19:1-9 (Zacchaeus)

Do you think Zacchaeus HAD to make things right?

Why do you think he wanted to?

What do you think it did for the people he had cheated?

What do you think it did for him?

**Story**

Read the story about Martin

What risk did Martin take in writing the letter?

How was his life affected by taking that risk?

**Wrap-up**

The most difficult part of making amends is just starting, because it involves admitting that we were wrong. It also puts us at the mercy of the other person who may not respond to us favorably. Even if the other person doesn’t want to forgive you or accept your attempts, you have done what God has asked you to do and there’s freedom in that. Jesus will give you the ability and strength to make things right and as a result you will experience real freedom.

**Martin**

 Martin had been having nightmares about his victim while in lockup. Now that he had time to think, he was feeling lots of guilt, remorse, and shame for what he had done.

 He started talking to his clinician about it, and they agreed that he should write to his victim’s mother to ask forgiveness. Martin was pretty nervous about sending such a letter for fear that she might just reject him.

 He agreed to write the letter – mostly for his sake – and then decide later about whether or not he would send it. It was good for him to get everything down on paper and off his chest, and he already felt a little better just from that.

 Martin started praying about whether he should send the letter. He didn’t want to re-open wounds for the mother. Finally, he decided to mail it, saying at the end, “I can understand if you can’t forgive me. I just wanted you to know how sorry I am, and that I pray for you all every night.”

 Martin nervously watched every day to see if he would receive a letter back. Finally, after three long weeks, one arrived. He was afraid to open it, so he just left it on his dresser all day until later that night.

 When he opened it, he quickly scanned through the letter first until he came to the words **I forgive you**.

“Thank you, Jesus,” was his response. He felt like a ton of bricks had been lifted off his back. He knew he needed to pay the consequences, and that he couldn’t change the past – as much as he wanted to – but now he could finally go on with his life, trying to help people and not hurt them, trying to avoid making the mistakes he had made in the past.

TOPIC: Childlike Faith

**Opening Discussion**

If you tell a three-year-old that Santa Claus or Bluey is in the other room, will that child usually believe you? Why? What will he or she do?

If you tell your average 16-year-old the same thing, what will he or she do? What has changed?

**Scripture**

 Jesus talks a lot about what true faith in God is. We are going to look at how He describes it.

Read Mark 10:13-16

What does Jesus mean when He says we need to be like children to enter into the kingdom of heaven?

If we have faith in God like a little child does, would that make a difference in our lives? How?

Read Matthew 7:13-23 (1-29, if time allows)

What is the narrow gate that Jesus talks about? Why is it so narrow?

Why is it easier to follow the gate that leads to destruction?

If you are a follower of Jesus, would others be able to tell that? How?

When Jesus talks about good fruit and bad fruit, what is He talking about?

What happens to the tree that produces bad fruit after awhile?

What is some good fruit that your life can produce?

**Wrap-up**

Jesus is very direct in verses 21-23 because He loves us and wants us to know Him. If we truly believe in Him, He says our lives will be different. We will not be perfect, and we will mess up, but there will be changes. Ask yourselves right now, “Am I different in some way because of Jesus?” If you are, then you are on the narrow road. If not, take the time to ask Him to be the center of your life, to change you. He will.

TOPIC: A New Beginning

**Opening Discussion**

Do you have some dreams, some hopes, some goals for this year? What are they?

How do you think you can accomplish these goals?

Does God fit into these plans?

Do you think God cares about you or your plans?

Why do you believe He cares? (Jesus gave his life for us)

**Scripture**

God wants to be part of your life and, in fact, to fill your life with good things:

 John 5:24 God promises eternal life and more

 Philippians 4:7 peace

 1 John 5:14-15 answers prayers

 1 John 5:4 victory

 Ephesians 6:10-11 strength and defense

 Romans 8:17 future

 Ephesians 3:20 His power working in us

**Wrap-up**

Ask for anyone to share an example that shows God at work in a life of faith, or tell what God has done for you.

If you trust God for this coming year – really trust Him no matter what seems to go wrong – He will come through for you. God keeps His promises.

TOPIC: Power

**Opening Discussion**

Who is the most powerful person in the world? What makes him/her powerful?

What different kinds of power are there? (physical, financial, political, intelligence, etc.)

How do you think a person became really powerful? (If the group is astute, ask: What is the main source of human power?)

**Scripture**

Read 1 Kings 18:20-35

In this Bible passage, Elijah has enemies that want to attack him and his faith in God.

What was Elijah trying to prove? Was he taking a big risk?

Where did Elijah believe his power came from?

Where did the other prophets look for their source of power?

Read 1 Kings 18:36-39

What kind of power does God have?

What kind of power does Elijah have?

How did he get that power? (believing and praying)

Like Elijah, we all have enemies. Some of them are inside of us (drugs or anger); others are outside (those who want to hurt us or see us get into trouble). Elijah relied on his faith and prayer to overcome his enemies. Just as with Elijah, God wants to give us the power to overcome the things or the people in our lives who want to hurt us.

Read Luke 17:5-6

How big is your faith?

How much faith does it take to have power in your life?

Jesus talked about faith to uproot a tree. Is there anything you need “uprooted” or taken out of your life? What will it take for that to happen?

How can faith and prayer help you?

**Wrap-up**

To get that power we must have faith that God has the power to help us. Pray for His help and then follow what He says. Elijah would have fallen to his enemies if he did not follow through on his faith. We can fall to our enemies (list some things that have been mentioned) if we don’t believe and follow God. God wants to help us follow through. He wants to give us the power.

TOPIC: The Power of Grace

**Opening Discussion**

Have you ever gotten away with something when you deserved to be punished?

Did you learn anything from it? Good or bad?

**Attention-getter**

Read the story about Eddie

What did Eddie deserve?

What was it that made Eddie not want to steal anymore?

How was this situation different than just getting away with something?

Have you ever had an experience like this?

How did that affect you?

**Scripture**

Read John 8:3-11 (woman caught in adultery)

What was so powerful about what Jesus did? (He could have punished her, but He chose to give her life.)

How do you think this woman felt?

How do you think it affected her life?

Read Romans 5:8 (. . . *while we were still sinners Christ died for us.*)

Why is what Jesus did more powerful than us just getting off?

How does the fact that God showed His kindness and love to you when you didn’t deserve it affect you?

**Wrap-up**

 While we are still messing up, God reaches out to us with His love. It gives us an opportunity for a new start.

**Eddie**

 Eddie had racked up a long list of charges by the time he was sixteen. He had been in and out of lots of group homes and programs, but nothing had really helped. Some had labeled him a kid without a conscience. But one of his crimes changed him forever.

 “Me and my friends were walking down the street when we saw the window down on a Volvo,” Eddie recalls. “I reached in and grabbed a cell phone that was sitting on the seat. We had done stuff like that so many times we didn’t even look to see if anyone was watching. That’s why we were so surprised when the owner of the car started yelling at us from across the street.

 “We took off running and threw the phone on the ground, and he started chasing us. I knew he had gotten a good look at us all, and I figured would probably go turn us in to the police.

 “The next day someone knocked at our door. I looked out the window and saw that it was the guy whose car we had broken into. Now I was really scared. I had friends who had been shot for less than this. My mother told me to answer the door. ‘No!’ I said, ‘I know that guy and I don’t want to see him!’

 “‘Son, he said, ‘I don’t want to get off on the wrong foot with you, but I want you to know why I have this cell phone. My wife is due to have a baby any day, and I want her to be able to reach me if she needs to get into the hospital.’

 “Then he told me that he owned a pizza place down the street and invited me to come in sometime for a free Coke. I said, ‘Sure. Thanks a lot. And, I’m sorry about your phone.’ Then he left.

 “I never took him up on his offer, because I would be too embarrassed. But that’s the last time I ever stole anything from anyone. I still can’t believe how that guy treated me. But it made me not want to hurt anybody else.”

TOPIC: Purpose

**Opening Discussion**

Have you ever felt that because of your past, things you have done or things about your family, that there is not much hope for the future?

Do you think God only works with people who have their lives together?

Have you ever thought God could not work with you to do great things?

**Scripture**

Read Judges 11:1-2 (the story of Jephthah)

What were some problems in Jephthah’s family that would affect his future? (his mother was a prostitute; his father never married his mother; his brothers threw him out)

Do you know anyone who can relate to Jephthah at all?

What would you do if you were Jephthah?

Read Judges 11:3-11

What did Jephthah do when he left his family? (became head of a group of adventurers which, most likely, was a group of men who did not have jobs and who probably hunted and scrounged for food)

What does this show about Jephthah’s character? (he was a leader; he did not get down about his circumstances)

What turned Jephthah’s life around? (he was asked to lead the army for his people)

Since they had thrown Jephthah out, what could he have told them?

Before he went to battle, what was the last thing that Jephthah did? (goes to the Lord)

How did God work with Jephthah to accomplish something great?

If God worked with Jephthah, do you think that He can work with you? How?

**Wrap-up**

The Bible is full of stories of people from the lowest and highest places who do great things. One of the greatest followers of Jesus was the Apostle Paul, who killed Christians before he believed in Jesus. It doesn’t matter what our families were like or what we have done on our lives. God can make our lives count. He can work with us to do great things. What we need to do is come to the Lord first. God takes us as we are, then He will change us to be what He wants us to be. Our part is to put God first, give our lives to Him.

TOPIC: Revenge

**Opening Discussion**

What is revenge?

Why do people want to get revenge?

What are some things people look to get revenge for?

Read “Ray’s Story”

Why did Ray want to get back at his father?

What could have happened if he had gotten on the right bus and seen his father?

How did God change things around? What happened in the end?

How do you think God looks at revenge?

**Scripture**

Read Exodus 2:11-15

What was Moses trying to accomplish by killing the Egyptian?

What do you think he expected as a response from the Hebrew slaves?

In what ways did his revenge backfire on him?

Tell about what later happened to Moses and how God took care of freeing the Hebrew slaves.

What do you think might have happened if the Hebrew slaves had joined Moses in killing the Egyptians?

**Wrap-up**

Read Romans 12:17-19 God says that He is the only one who can deal with situations like these. He is a just God and He is the only one who knows exactly what needs to be done. If we take it on ourselves to punish, we will only make things worse. Not taking revenge is hard, but if we trust God, He will make things right.

**Ray’s Revenge**

 He had left my mother and me before I was born. We were living in the projects, living without anything. Now he was going to pay for it.

 I had run out of time and money. I was on the run from the police with warrants out for my arrest. I had no place else to turn, so why not call “Dad.” He had never done anything for me in the seventeen years that I had been living. So the least he could do was send me a bus ticket. I was shocked when he actually sent me the ticket. And he was going to be shocked when I got to Detroit.

 As I was riding on that bus, I kept thinking about all of the hurt and pain that I had been through. I put all of the blame on my absent father. Now he was going to pay. I came up with a great plan. As soon as I saw him, I was going to punch him out, hurt him as much as I could.

 But even back then, God was in control. Wouldn’t you know it, I got on the wrong bus! I had to get on another bus just to get back to Detroit. By the time I got there, I was exhausted, and my father wasn’t even there. His brother picked me up. I couldn’t even get back at him. He got me again! Soon after that I was back in jail.

 A couple of years later, I became a Christian in lockup. I still didn’t like what my father had done to me and my mother, but something started changing. I didn’t hate him anymore. A year later, on my way to Bible college, I stopped by to see my dad. We talked and I ended up praying with him. God had let me lead my dad to Him. Now we have a real father and son relationship.

 But today, I keep thinking what would’ve happened if I had gotten on the right bus? Where would I be now? What would’ve happened to dad? God can even take our bad plans and make something good out of them.

TOPIC: Thanksgiving

**Opening Discussion**

What are some things we do for Thanksgiving?

Do you have any favorite memories of Thanksgiving?

Do you think there is value in taking time specifically to be thankful?

What are some of the things you are most thankful for?

Do you think God had a role in any of those things?

**Scripture**

Read James 1:17

What do you think are some of the gifts you have received from God?

Have you ever thanked Him for them? How?

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:18

In what situations should we be thankful?

When things are going well for you, do you tend to be thankful? Why? Why not?

What are some things you could be thankful for when things are not going well?

How does being thankful no matter what affect us?

**Story**

Read the “Story About an Imprisoned Pastor in China”

What do you think the pastor meant by “God has been very good to me?”

**Wrap-up**

Nobody wants to be away from his or her family for Thanksgiving, but if we choose to allow God to work in our lives, we can be thankful no matter what we are going through. He will be working in us so good things can come out of even bad circumstances.

**Story About an Imprisoned Pastor in China**

 In the mid-1980’s, it was very dangerous to be a Christian in China. In fact, meeting as Christians in the “underground church” was illegal. Several hundred thousand Christians were imprisoned – many were even put to death for their faith.

 In 1984, Scott Larson was in China smuggling Bibles to some of those underground Christians. He had the opportunity to meet a pastor who had been in prison for nearly thirty years. He had just gotten out of prison when Scott met him at an underground church service.

 After the meeting, Scott went up to him and, through the interpreter asked, “What was it like in a Chinese torture prison?” Scott was anxious to hear some of his horror stories. But the pastor only smiled and said, “God has been very good to me.”

TOPIC: True Comfort

**Discussion**

What are some things that make people unhappy?

What are some things that cause us pain?

What do people do to try to make themselves happy?

What do they do to try to avoid pain?

Do those things work? (sometimes, temporarily)

Many people in the Bible went through tough times and pain. We’re going to look to see what they did to find true comfort.

**Scripture**

Read Psalm 23- Psalms were poems written by people who wanted to share about God and their experiences with God.

What was the writer relying on in his time of pain?

How did God help him?

This Psalm is often read at funerals today. Why do you think that is?

Read Genesis 21:8-21

 Explain the circumstances around this story and why Sarah hated Ishmael.

What are some of the feelings Hagar must have had?

In what ways did God show his care for her and her son?

What difference did it make?

Could God do that for us?

**Wrap-up**

We try to get happiness and avoid hurt in many ways: through drugs, alcohol, relationships. The problem is that those things never bring what they promise. If we have faith in God, we can be sure that God hears our prayers and that He will give us true strength and comfort. It may seem easier just avoiding a problem, but it never is. Pray to God for help. He will not let you down.

TOPIC: Truth and Lies

**Opening Discussion**

Does everyone lie at times? One kid in a Bible study said he tells at least 200 lies a day.

How many lies do you think the average person tells in a day?

What is a lie? The dictionary says:

A false statement deliberately presented as being true, a falsehood.

Something meant to deceive or give a wrong impression.

Why do people lie? Is it ever right to lie?

Tell us about a time someone lied to you. How did that affect you?

Tell us about a time you lied to someone and how that affected the other person. How did that lie affect you?

What is the truth? How do you know when someone is telling the truth?

How would you feel if you had a friend who always told you the truth?

**Scripture**

Read John 14:6

When Jesus says that He is the truth, what does He mean?

(That He is true in His complete character. There is no lie in him at all. He always says what is true. His life is truth.)

When Jesus says that He is the way, what does He mean?

(He is the way for us to follow.)

When Jesus says that He is the life, what does He mean?

Read John 10:10

Why did the thief come?

What does it mean “to rob, kill and destroy?”

Why did Jesus come? (“so that everyone would have life, and have it to the fullest.”)

What does it mean to have life to the fullest?

**Wrap-up**

Jesus says that He is the way, the truth and the life. He is offering us a new life here on earth, and life forever with Him in heaven. He can give us the power to know the truth, tell the truth, and live by the truth. Jesus proved He could be trusted when He died on a cross for us. He died for us because He loves us. Through His death all the things that we have done wrong – what the Bible calls sin – can be forgiven.

TOPIC: When Good Things Happen to Bad People

**Opening Discussion**

Do you ever feel envious of people who seem to have it all?

Do you know people who cheat but never get caught?

What are some things you might want to get or do the “right” way, but are tempted to get or do more quickly the “wrong” way?

**Scripture**

Read Psalm 73:1-16

How was Asaph (the writer) feeling when he wrote this?

What was bothering him so much?

What do you think you would have done if you were him?

Read Psalm 73:17-28

What changed Asaph’s outlook? (v. 17: started seeing things from God’s perspective)

Read verses 23-26 again.

What are the things that Asaph is reminded are more valuable than what the wicked have?

Have you ever experienced doing something God’s way when it seemed harder than the wrong way?

How did you feel about it afterwards?

Did you think it was a better way in the long run?

**Wrap-up**

People cheat all the time to get ahead. But if we choose to look at a situation from God’s perspective, we will see that His way is always best for us in the long run-you never have to look over your shoulder if you’ve done everything legit!

TOPIC: Who is God?

**Opening Discussion**

Describe what you think a perfect parent would be like.

What would that parent do if you did something wrong?

What do you think God is like?

Name some things that you think of when you think about God.

**Scripture**

Read Luke 15:11-31 (Explain beforehand that we are going to read a “parable”, a story Jesus told that has a meaning behind it. Ask the group to be thinking about the meaning of the story.)

What did the son who went away do? Why did he do it?

What happened when all his money was gone? (Explain how working with pigs would have been detestable to a Jewish person)

What did he decide to do? How was he going to go back home? (asking for forgiveness)

How could the father have reacted?

How did the father act when he saw the son coming?

Why did he react the way he did?

In the story, who is the father?

Who is the son who went away?

Who is the son who stayed behind?

What does the story tell us about God? (loving, forgiving, just)

What does the father tell the oldest son about how he feels when someone comes back to him? What does he do for those who are with him? (verse 31)

If there is time, read the following:

Genesis 1:1 God is eternal

Psalm 139:1-14 God is all-powerful and knowing

1 John 4:7-21 God is love

**Story**

Read “The Man and the Chair”

**Wrap-up**

Jesus wants to hold us, like He held that man. God is not an old man waiting to punish you, or wanting to hurt you, or wanting to leave you. Like the father in the story Jesus told, God is waiting for us with His arms open. He loves you and likes you. Like the son who went away, we need to realize that we have messed up, turn to God, and ask Him to forgive us.

**The Man and the Chair**

 A priest went to visit a terminally ill man in his home. As he entered the bedroom, he noticed a chair at the man’s bedside and asked him what it was doing there.

The sick man replied, “I had placed Jesus on that chair and was talking to Him before you arrived. For years,” he continued, “I found it extremely difficult to pray until a friend explained to me that prayer was simply a matter of talking with Jesus. He told me to place an empty chair nearby, to imagine Jesus sitting on that chair, and to speak with Him and listen to what He says to me in reply. I’ve had no difficulty in praying ever since.”

 Some days later the daughter of the sick man came to the parish house to inform the priest that her father had just died. She said, “I left him alone

for a couple of hours. He seemed so peaceful. When I got back to the room, I found him dead. I noticed a strange thing, though: His head was resting, not on the bed, but on an empty chair that was beside the bed.”

Taken from “The Signature of Jesus” by Brennan Manning, A Chosen Book, Fleming H. Revell Company, NJ, ©1988

*APPENDIX*

**STRAIGHT AHEAD MINISTRIES**

**BIBLE STUDY LEADERS’ ORIENTATION MANUAL**

## Overview

As a Bible study leader, you have been called into one of the most exciting ministries available. You work in a system that cannot, by law, promote or recognize God or religion. You minister to youths who have little understanding of the Gospel, yet who are hungry for the Lord’s presence in their lives. You are in a ministry that is a spiritual battlefield. When Jesus sent out His disciples, he admonished them: ” Behold*, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore, be wise as serpents, and harmless as doves”* (Matthew 10:16). That admonition holds true in our ministry today.

Our main objective is for God to work through us as instruments of salvation. It’s the goal of Straight Ahead Ministries to give every incarcerated youth the opportunity to hear and to respond to the Gospel, and to allow them to grow in their faith as far as that youth wishes to grow. God uses us, His children, to spread His word of love and hope to the young people we serve.

Before each study you lead, pray for an opportunity to bring these young people to a place where they will want to know Christ. During the study, keep mindful of that purpose, as distractions will arise. Subjects will come up that will divide the group, even as they have divided churches; you will, however, be an effective disciple and discipler if you keep the Gospel first in your time with the youths. After the study, pray that the seeds have been planted on fertile soil.

Your involvement in this ministry is an answer to many prayers. You will be tested, discouraged, and elated; most likely, all in the same week! You are not along in those feelings. That is the nature of this ministry. The highs are way up there, and the lows can be tough. Despite that, over eighty percent (80%) of our volunteers stay for longer than a year. Following will be some of their words and techniques.

There are a lot of “dos and don’ts” in this manual for a reason: it’s designed to be a laundry list, covering anything that may arise as an issue, most of which you will rarely encounter. Please use this manual as a reference point. Also, please use the staff at Straight Ahead and your fellow volunteers to assist you in areas that you need advice on. By following these principles, by sticking to the basic message of the Gospel, and by relying on one another, you will be effective, you will love the youth you serve, and you will grow deeper in your own love for Christ.

## Interactions Within Institutions

Contrary to popular belief, we do not have the right to lead Bible studies at the detention and treatment centers. Some states enforce blanket prohibitions on such studies. We are guests of the institutions; therefore, it is important that we are aware of the rules of the institutions where we serve and that we keep a servant/guest attitude.

Over the past 35 plus years, we’ve only had a few Bible studies shut down due to problems that arose at the studies. But even one study is too important to lose. Keep in mind that any controversy can be used to stop a study.

### A. Staff Relationships

The facility staff and your relationship with them, play a significant role in how effective the study is. Each facility is different in how its staff views the studies. Most staff are receptive to what you are doing. Some staff are suspicious of anyone coming in. They have seen too many do-gooders come in, start programs, and then leave when things get a little tough. Most are protective of the youth. Once they see your commitment, they can be a great asset to getting through to the youth.

There are many staff who are suspicious of Christians in general. They view Christianity as being the exclusive domain of the conservative right and as being an exclusionary religion. Our faith should be the most inclusionary of all. To the staff, you may be the only Christian that they come in contact with. Be open to their concerns and be available for their needs. Many staff members have come to faith as a result of the Bible studies.

Finally, once you have become established at the institution, the staff will look at you as the “God-Person.” They may come to you with questions or concerns, or they may be looking to you for prayer. They will see you as someone with a more direct connection to God. We can use that time to help them through some struggles and to effectively show them the love of Christ.

### B. Institutional Rules

In order to foster good relations with the institutions, it is important that we familiarize ourselves with their rules. Some programs rely on a behavioral modification model of treatment, where youth are rewarded and penalized points for following or disobeying the rules. Other programs are *seemingly* looser with the rules, as they rely on other treatment models.

In either case, we have to be accommodating. Small infractions of rules can lead to consequences for the youth and for the study’s effectiveness. Usually, supervisors will give you information on the program. By asking, you are showing an interest in something that they are committed to doing.

Find out who you should go to if a questions or problem arises. When you want to try something new (such as bringing in books or a guest, etc.) make sure that you run it by the staff person in charge at least a week or two beforehand. Our respect for the program is essential if we are to minister effectively.

The following are some general, though not exhaustive, rules that apply at each institution:

1. Do not be alone with a young person. If they want to speak with you, do it in an open area within view of a staff person.
2. Do not give or take anything from a resident without first clearing it with staff.
3. Do not promise the youth anything that you cannot deliver.
4. Do not take sides in staff/resident, parent/child disputes.
5. Do not ask youth why they are incarcerated – they may share this information, but it should be at their discretion.
6. Do not promise confidentiality (more on this following).
7. Be wary of physical contact with youths (see below\*).
8. Do not give residents your telephone number or address or take theirs without prior permission from the institution. If the institution allows you to give your address and telephone number and you do not feel comfortable doing so, you can give the youth the Straight Ahead or your ministry address and messages will be passed on to you.
9. Do not contact people outside of the institution for the youth. They may ask you to call a friend or a relative. The youth are limited to whom they can contact, and they can only contact people through the program.
10. Do not say anything negative about the program, staff or methods. The residents may try to get you to take their side when they put down the program. Even if you think that something may not be fair, do not voice that opinion to the residents. There are usually reasons behind seemingly unfair methods. You can ask a supervisor to explain something if you are concerned.
11. Do be courteous to staff.
12. Do follow protocol and directives from the staff.
13. Do keep to time guidelines.
14. When taking prayer requests to pass on to the prayer chain, do not use last names.

If you have a question about any situation that you do not know how to handle, contact a Straight Ahead staff person.

\*Some institutions do not allow any physical contact between residents and volunteers; others do not have set guidelines. You should find out about the institution’s rules on physical contact. In order to avoid difficulties, there are some basic issues that you need to consider:

Many of the youth who we come in contact with have been abused, neglected, or maltreated. Seemingly innocent gestures, such as a pat on the shoulder, can be difficult for some youth to interpret. They may pull away or get tense. They may not know how to react, or they may misinterpret the gesture as one of an aggressive or sexual nature.

You need to use your discretion and, also, get a sense of the youth you are dealing with. If you sense that a young person is uncomfortable being in close proximity with you, do not try to get closer. Show your concern with words and prayer.

Never be alone with one of the residents. If they hug you, having a staff person around can verify the innocent nature of the gesture. Also, if you are feeling that the young person is relating to you in an inappropriate way, ask your co-leader what she thinks. Your partner will often see things that you may miss.

Programs will differ on whether a staff person sits in on the study. Some places require a staff person to be present in the room. In that situation, you can ask if the staff wishes to participate; in other places, no staff will be present, but they will be accessible to you, or a staff person may come in until they’re comfortable you can control the participants. Many staff members have come to faith through sitting in on studies.

**C. Confidentiality and Privileged Communications**

Juvenile justice involved youth are subject to strict privacy/confidentiality laws. Those laws are designed to protect them and their families from public exposure and ridicule. In theory, the laws give the juveniles a chance not to be branded “criminals” for the rest of their lives.

In order to keep their confidentiality, do not use last names when giving prayer requests. Also, don’t casually discuss the youths with others. The world can be a small place at times and someone who knows the youths, their families, or the victims may recognize who you are talking about.

A situation could arise where youth may want to get something off of their chest, confess something that they’ve done. In most states, you do not have what the law calls “privilege.” In other words, if a resident tells you of a crime that they’ve committed, one which has not been completely adjudicated, you could be called to testify against the youth.

To avoid that situation, be up front and tell the youth that you cannot discuss past crimes unless they are ones for which they’ve been committed. Also, inform all the residents at the Bible study that you are required to share with the staff any threats that they make against another resident or staff or any threats that they make against themselves. Explain that you have to do that out of concern for them.

This is a serious issue, though one that doesn’t come up often. If you are asked a question such as “If I tell you a secret, will you promise not to tell anyone?” You have to tell them you cannot make that promise. You can explain you will help them as best you can and that if there is a staff person they trust, you will go with them to talk to that staff person. You never want to break a trust that has developed.

## General Guidelines for the Bible Study

The general philosophy of Straight Ahead Ministries is each Bible study should have its own characteristics, drawing upon the strengths and gifts of the leaders. The following guidelines are set out in general terms and are suggestions based on the experience of other leaders.

### A. Effective Bible Study Formats

1. Before the study begins, take some time to mingle with the staff and residents. If there are new residents at the program, introduce yourself and invite them to the study. Try to remember names, and so you can invite them to come to the study the next time that you see them (but do not use too much pressure).
2. Set up the room in the way you want it. If you have permission from the staff, move the furniture to how you like it. Sitting in a circle is often the best way to facilitate discussion. It’s also good to have leaders sit opposite each other, so as not to have an “us and them” situation

If a young person doesn’t want to sit within the circle, ask them to come in as it would be easier for you if they were closer. If they refuse, don’t push the issue during the study. Afterwards, you may wish to find out if there was something wrong, such as having trouble with others in the group. If so, let them know they can sit next to you next time.

1. Start out by mentioning you are a volunteer, and you are not being paid to be there. Explain to the residents that you are there out of your love for the Lord and out of your concern for them. They’re not used to people helping them or caring for them for nothing. They will appreciate that, and they will be more open.
2. Open with prayer. This will set the tone for the time together and can often calm the residents down before you get into a discussion. If you have some new kids, ask someone to explain what prayer is, as they may not know. Explain that prayer is talking with God, who is present in the room. Often times, residents will see the Bible study as a break from the hassles and the fear they may experience in the institution. The study should be a haven where all feel welcome and safe.
3. Follow a general format of starting a study with a story, having questions and answers about the story, reading applicable Scripture, reviewing what it means, discussion how it applies, and wrapping it up in a way that keeps them thinking about what you discussed. Be mindful that the youth will often have limited attention spans, so try to keep things moving.
4. Make sure to leave time to take prayer requests from the residents. You can either have them tell you out loud or have them write the requests down. When taking the requests, you should write down the first name of the youth only (if there is more than one person with the same name, use a last name initial). Tell the residents you will be sending the requests to people who have made a commitment to pray for them. **And make sure you contact the prayer chain coordinator with the requests that night or the next day.**
5. End the study with a time of prayer. If there’s time, ask the young people if they want to pray out loud. If some do not want to pray, then tell them they can say “pass”. Many have never prayed out loud before, so this is a good opportunity to remind them that God is present and prayer is talking with God. Many residents look forward to this time of prayer. When you pray, keep it relatively short so you do not lose them.

### B. Avoiding Problems

To be forewarned is to be forearmed. The following are some issues that arise over and over again, and some strategies to deal with them.

1. Be careful not to let the discussion lead to cutting down of staff and other kids. Often youth will have issues with another resident or staff and will try to bring the discussion to a personal level against the other person. You need to be firm in telling the youth that we are not there to put people down. Point out that people have bad days or have needs that we do not know about. If they persist, tell them you can talk about it after the study.
2. Do not take sides on parental or staff issues. Many times, the residents will present scenarios in which their parents or the staff look like the bad guys. That may be the case; we, however, shouldn’t take sides as we don’t know the whole story. We should point out the Bible asks us to pray for those with whom we have trouble, and the Lord requires respect for others.
3. Use the same version of the Bible as the residents. We encourage the use of a contemporary translation of the Bible. Many good translations are written in a vernacular the kids will better understand. It’s tempting to use our favorite translation of the Bible while we let the kids read in another version. The trouble comes when they get stuck on a word that is different from the one in your Bible or when you ask what “heavy laden” means when their version does not use that term.

They may also not understand why there are so many different versions of the Bible. If that comes up, you can explain that originally Scripture was written in Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic. As language has changed, so have the translations in order to reflect the original meaning.

1. Avoid embarrassing the residents. Ask for volunteers to read and never call on individuals. Many of the youth cannot read or read poorly. If a young person wants to read, but is having difficulty, help them along (but do not be overly helpful – let them try to work through a tough word), don’t let other residents make fun of the reader, and encourage them with a “great job” when they’re done.
2. Spread out who will answer. Sometimes one or two youths will try to answer all of the questions. Try to see if others can answer so they will not feel slighted. Ask them to raise their hands if you are in a big group. You can tell the youth answering all of the questions that you know they know the answer, but you want to see if anyone else does, too.
3. Try to find something correct in each answer. Young people are encouraged when they answer correctly. Try not to say “no” to an answer if you can even find a grain of “correctness” in it. This is not easy, but the results are great.
4. Be careful how you say things. Don’t use words that are over the youths’ heads. Many Christian terms we take for granted have no meaning to them. They will usually not ask you what a word means as they are too embarrassed. When presenting a case to a jury, a good lawyer goes by the KISS rule: Keep It Simple, Stupid. We should also keep things simple.
5. Stay focused yet be flexible. Often times we prepare a study only to find the needs of the kids are elsewhere. Be prepared to focus on those needs, but don’t be led off the subject when someone wants to go off on a tangent. Gently try to get them to focus back on

the discussion. If they persist, tell them you can talk about their subject after the study. If you do not do this, you will lose the attention of the others in the group.

1. If you don’t know how to answer a question, tell the group you will try to find an answer for the following week. We often feel like we have to know everything by rote, but that’s not the case. Young people will give you more respect for saying you do not know something, and you will research it, than if you try to wing it.

## Controversial Areas

### A. In General

The Bible study will be a microcosm of the Church. Issues that have divided the Church for centuries will come up during the studies. It is at those times that Jesus’ admonition to be shrewd, yet loving, will come into play.

Keep in mind that the youth we work with have a difficult time with basic Christian concepts, such as faith, grace, and salvation. Keeping to those basics will generally keep us away from areas that are divisive. We must come to terms with the fact that the Lord left many gray areas in the Bible and that we do not have to see everything in black and white.

We need to be able to discuss issues, acknowledge when there are areas in dispute within the Church, and remember that the Holy Spirit is the One who will do the convicting.

With all that said, inevitably, areas that stir up debate will arise. In those situations, a few general guidelines can assist in resolving them:

1. If a youth has a controversial matter that she wishes to discuss, talk about it one-on-one if at all possible. Otherwise, such a discussion can disrupt a whole group. Others in the group may misinterpret what is said or may not have any idea what you are talking about. It only takes one resident telling a clinician that the Bible study leader says that “all \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blanks) are going to hell” to have the group shut down – even if that was never said.

Also, be aware that a young man or woman in your group could be struggling with the issue and could be hurt or misled by what is said. Others may be trying to subtly “get” that person by bringing things out at the study. How you handle the subject will affect that young person’s perception of God and her perception of how God sees her.

1. Find out why the young person wants to discuss the matter and find out where she stands on the issue. She could be struggling with the problem herself. You can point out that we all have areas that we struggle with, that God loves us as we are, even enough to send His son to die for us, and that He will help us to overcome our struggles as they arise.

It is important to share some of our present struggles. By referring to all of our problems as being in the past, we can come across as if we are presently free from all trouble. The more transparent you are, the deeper your relationship with the youth will be. As always there is a caveat: the youth look to you as a representative of Christ. While sharing your struggles be sure to also share the victories. Show them hope.

1. Give your opinion on the subject and point out that there are other Christians who may hold positions that differ from yours. Listen to their concerns and to their point of view. Tell them to openly ask God for direction on the matter. And keep asking yourself why you hold the position you do. Is it a well-reasoned opinion, one that someone else told you, or one that you have always just held? Be introspective and open.
2. Again, let the Holy Spirit do the convicting. We are there to present the Gospel and to make disciples. We can and should share our beliefs and the basis for those beliefs. In the end, however, it is the Holy Spirit who brings knowledge and discernment.

### B. Some Specific Issues

1. Sexual issues are probably the most common that you will face. Most of the youth are in their early to mid-adolescence. Their bodies are changing, and many are struggling with their own sexual issues and identity. Many have been sexually abused. A young man once said that he could hate homosexuals because God does. When asked where he had gotten that from, the young man said that it is in the Bible. It turns out that this boy had been sexually abused by his father. The Bible study leader was able to share how God loves all and does not hate homosexuals. They also discussed what the Bible says about sex. The young man was able to see that Jesus asks us to come to him just as we are, then He helps us to deal with issues that confront us.

A Christian view on sexual morals is a minority view. “Just say no” does not work. “Why say no” should be how you focus your discussion. Point to the repercussions of uninhibited sex: sexually transmitted diseases (STD’s), HIV and AIDS, unwanted pregnancy, and children without love. Then discuss our need for love and intimacy with one person in marriage. They may not agree, but at least a seed is planted.

1. Substance abuse is another area of controversy. A young person will often try to justify using drugs: “If God made all of the plants and animals for humans, why can’t we smoke marijuana?” Again, try to show reasons why using drugs is against God’s will. Point out that the plants themselves are not evil, it is how we use them. For example, marijuana can

either be used for medicinal purposes or to get high; the coca plant can either be used by a dentist for Novocain or by an addict for crack.

Explain that God asks us to stay away from drug and alcohol abuse due to the physical, emotional, and spiritual damage such abuse causes. Personal stories from overcomers can bring that point home. Also, get the young people to think about people they know who have had their lives ruined by drug and alcohol abuse.

Be mindful of where they come from and put yourself in their place. If you did not have Christ in your life, if you were living in a miserable place, often devoid of love, and you had little hope, why wouldn’t you use drugs? One young man said that marijuana was “Novocain for the soul.” He used it so that he would not hurt. Point out how it is only Christ who can ease our pain as He knows what we have been through and He knows how to help us.

Finally, discussions about substance abuse can lead to discussions about the body being God’s temple, His dwelling place within us. If we love God, we should respect His house as we would respect a church building. Concrete images go a long way to bring this point home (“Would you smoke a joint in church? Why not?”).

1. Do no attack their culture. We have to be on guard against a mentality of “because I was an X before coming to Christ, all X is bad” or “because I dislike Y and I am a Christian, all Y is bad”. If we go into a program and put down what, to adolescents, is the center of their lives – their culture, friends and family – then we will build barriers to the Gospel. A well-meaning visitor once went to a Bible study and said that she thought wearing make-up was wrong based on her view of Scripture. When the Bible study leader came back the next week, several kids were upset and one asked if his grandmother was going to hell because she wears lipstick. Seemingly innocent comments can be taken to extremes.

If is good to give your opinion on dress, music, body piercing, etc., but listen to their opinions also. Point to Scripture to back up your view, but remember when Paul told men to groom themselves like men, they were wearing what we would consider dresses today. We do not need to compromise our standards, but we should be able to explain where those standards come from.

Many of the youth may try to shock you with their behavior to see if you will turn away from them. Listen and do not judge. Explain why you do not agree with something and be open. Do you disagree with something because it goes against God, or because it goes against something that you are not comfortable with? Be able to answer with “I believe” rather than “God says it so just do it.”

1. We do not have to attack other religions while defending our faith. Never put another faith down. Always point to the positives of Christianity. Explain the basis of your faith, bringing in historical details and personal experiences. Know why you believe. Also, become familiar with other beliefs so you can show how Christianity is different.

We can often use foundations of other beliefs to point to the Gospel. For instance, a Jehovah’s Witness’ basic belief in the Bible and in God can lead to discussions on the three person nature of God. A Muslim’s belief in Abraham and in Jesus as a prophet can lead to discussions on the Fall of humans and the Redemption.

Discussions on other faiths often come up when someone known to a young person has died. Because that person was a Buddhist, is he in hell? Explain that God is the judge and not you, that she can be sure of her salvation through faith in Christ, and that she can hope

that at some point the other person had come to faith. This is a difficult area, but one that comes up often.

Many of the young people, if they have had any church experience, come from Roman Catholic backgrounds. Many of our leaders come from the same background. There are many common beliefs between believing Catholics and believing Protestants. There are also significant differences. There are true believers in each church and true unbelievers. How we deal with the differences is important.

First, know what the teachings of the church are since they may be different from what is commonly believed. If you do not know about something (such as transubstantiation of the Eucharist), tell the youth that you will research it. Look into it and try to see where the different teachings come from.

Secondly, how you handle an issue is critical. A young man came to a new program and told the leader that he would not go to the Bible study because the leader at another program had told him that he could not pray to Mary. The new leader told him that praying to Mary came (in part) from the belief that she is in closer proximity to God and that He will listen to her for us. The leader then went on to explain that he prays to God through Jesus – a direct route. He then explained the Gospel. The leader never had to tell the young man not to pray to Mary. That young man came to the study and accepted Christ.

Finally, explain that there are going to be differences, even within a church, and that these differences have divided the Church for centuries. Stick to the basic Gospel message and acknowledge that God can work through other belief systems to bring people to Himself.

## Following up With Youth

One area that often discourages leaders in institutions is what happens to the youth once they leave the programs. Young people who have grown in their relationship with the Lord in great ways often fall back into old behaviors once they get back home. They do not want to go to church or youth group and they often end up back with their old friends.

There are ways to help. First, if a young person wants to stay in touch with you once he leaves a program, ask someone in the administration if you are allowed to have contact outside of the institution. Some states have laws against such contact while others welcome it. If you are allowed to have such contact, ask if you can take the youth’s address and telephone number. If you cannot,

ask if you can give him your address and number. Again, you can use the Straight Ahead address if you want.

If you cannot make a commitment to contact the young person, do not take the information. They do not need another adult letting them down.

In all likelihood, you will not be contacted by the youth. You will have to make the first contact. You may find that the youth’s family is open to such contact, indifferent or even hostile to it. If the

youth is not home, try back some other time. Kids will often times not get messages that you leave for them.

If you do not make contact, try to set up a casual meeting. You do not need to do anything exciting or church related. A fast food meal, biking, playing ball, hanging out are all great events for the youth. Oftentimes, you will get to meet a lot of their friends, as they want to show you off. You will also have interaction with their families. These are great ministry opportunities, though you will see where the expression “the apple does not fall far from the tree” comes from.

In general, keep the discussion light. The young person may be feeling guilty about not praying or about wandering away from the Lord. Remind him that God is still there and still loves him.

One thing to be prepared for is the youth not showing up for a meeting. This can be difficult, but do not take it as a personal put-down. The young person may be testing you to see if you will keep trying to see him. Also, commitments are often something new for the kids. They may never have needed to keep an appointment (outside of court!) and may do something else if a better opportunity comes up. Call him later to explain that you were at the meeting spot as planned. See if you can try to get together some other time. Your commitment is a new model for them.

A young person with whom you have been in contact may stop returning your phone calls or may try to avoid you. This often happens when he is starting to mess up in some way. You are a reminder of what God wants him to be and he may be feeling guilty about that. When that happens, a card or a letter from you can help to break the ice.

One of the most difficult aspects of aftercare is trying to get a young person involved in a church. They, like most of us, are intimidated by new things, especially church. By the time they leave the program, they will have built up a relationship with you, not with another person or church. If you live near the youth, invite him to come to church or to an adult Bible study with you.

If they are looking for a church in an area that is not near to you, contact someone you know from a church in the kids’ neighborhood. Find someone who is willing to meet with you and the youth and who is willing to commit to taking them to church. If you do not know of a good church or contact person, contact Straight Ahead and we can try to help out.

One thing to be on guard against is manipulation. Most of the time, the young people will not try to get things from you as they respect you; they are, however, used to getting things through manipulation and they do not always see it as something wrong. Fifteen years of learned behavior does not usually go away overnight. If a youth asks for money, do not give it to him. Find out why he needs the money and see if you can help him in some other way (like filling out job applications). This can be hard to do, but it will keep your relationship on a solid foundation.

Finally, never give up hope. We do not know what impact a card, a call or a visit will have on a kid. One leader sent a Christmas card to a young man he had not heard from in over a year. Several months after Christmas, that young man sent a note to the leader saying that the card was the only Christmas card he had had. They have re-established their contact and the young man’s faith is growing. God gives us the opportunity to plant seeds, but it is He who grows the crops.