

**PRISONER PEN PAL PROGRAM**  
**Diocese of Lansing**  
*(Revised 1-5-05)*

**The Prisoner Pen Pal Program is part of the Restorative Justice Ministry in our diocese.  
We encourage healing from the harm caused by crime for the victim, offender &  
community.**

Gary Ashby, Director  
Restorative Justice Ministry  
Diocese of Lansing  
300 West Ottawa  
Lansing, MI 48933  
517-342-2495 (o) e-mail [gashby@dioceseoflansing.org](mailto:gashby@dioceseoflansing.org)

Angela Fowler, Manager  
Prisoner Pen Pal Program  
300 West Ottawa  
Lansing MI 48933  
517-342-2494 (o) e-mail [afowle@dioceseoflansing.org](mailto:afowle@dioceseoflansing.org)

**VOLUNTEER GUIDELINES**

It is our hope that you will see yourself first and foremost as ambassadors of Christ to the prisoners with whom you correspond. This doesn't mean that you always need to be writing about religious things. We hope, however, that from time to time you inquire about your pen pal's faith and religious practices.

You are encouraged to share your faith and how God is working in your life and how he may have helped you in the past. We expect you to do all you can to strengthen your own faith. Daily prayer and or reflection on the Scriptures are highly recommended. We urge you to include your pen pal in your prayers mindful that he/she may have burdens and obstacles we can hardly imagine.

**THE MATCHING PROCESS**

We require that you read these guidelines and fill out the application form. Upon receipt of your application, your name is matched with an inmate from an institution in the Diocese of Lansing. You will receive a letter from us with your prisoner pen pal's name and prison address. You can start by writing the first letter. Your correspondent is told that he has been given a pen pal who will be writing soon. Your first name only is given to the inmate.

Before inmates are allowed to write, we require them to read and sign guidelines which ask them to pray daily and to commit to conducting their correspondence as a Christian friend. Please advise our office at the first indication of inappropriate behavior on the part of the inmate.

At the present time, all of the inmates in the Prisoner Pen Pal Program are male.

## **FORWARDING LETTERS**

**Never use your own address as a return address.** Instead arrange for a PO Box, coordinate with your church to use their address, or use our address at the **Restorative Justice Ministry, 300 West Ottawa St, Lansing MI 48933**. If you use our address, we periodically read the prisoner's letters to ensure that the content is appropriate and safe before forwarding the prisoner's letter on to you. When the prisoner writes back he sends the letter to our office and he never sees your address. We closely monitor each pen pal relationship that is mailed through our office. **Remember to use your FIRST NAME only on the envelope and in the letter.**

If you write through a PO box or parish office, we do not see the prisoner's letters, so they will not be opened and read by us. However, we will contact you from time to time to see how the letter writing is going.

## **ECUMENICAL**

We invite prisoners of all faiths to write in our ministry, and our volunteers can be of any faith.

## **VISITS & PHONE CALLS**

We do not allow you to visit your prisoner pen pal, or to receive phone calls from your prisoner. Do not give a prisoner your phone number. This ministry is meant to reach out to prisoners through letters only.

## **LEGAL ADVICE OR COUNSEL**

We advise pen pals never to become involved in the legal matters of their prisoner's case. This includes writing letters to parole boards or attorneys. State from the beginning that this is a Christian friendship and all other matters must be taken to a lawyer or case worker.

## **FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE**

Most prisoners are poor and sometimes request money from their pen pal. Small donations of money are allowed on a per case basis after first consulting with the Restorative Justice Ministry. Prisoners are only allowed to **receive money orders** and they must be processed through the Restorative Justice office. Never sign or co-sign a loan for a prisoner or become involved in any financial or business venture.

## **INSTITUTIONAL MAIL**

***There are strict rules regarding what a prisoner can receive through the mail in the prisons.*** Prisoners are not allowed to receive cash, packages, books, food and clothing from the outside. Greeting cards must be of a single thickness of paper without layers or stickers. Never put stickers on your letter or envelope. Do not send laminated prayer cards, laminated book marks or Polaroid photos.

Prisoners are only allowed to order books and clothing through an approved vendor that the prison designates. You are allowed to help them buy books through the approved vendor.

Contact the Restorative Justice Ministry or the prison mail room to find out about the approved vendors before you send anything into the prison other than a simple letter or card. If you mail your prisoner an item that the prison designates as inappropriate, the prisoner must pay to have it sent back to you or the prison will destroy it. You can cause your prisoner undue hardship by not following the mailing rules of the prison.

## **PHOTOS**

Your prisoner pen pal will be eager to see what you look like and we do allow them to have a picture of you. If you are a woman, it would be best to send a picture of yourself with your family or a group shot with you in it. Prisoners especially benefit from family pictures. Inmates seek family ties and the love of Christ shared through letters and photos sent from a family context can open hearts to the Gospel.

## **A WORD OF CAUTION**

Many prisoners are lonely and can easily become romantically involved with a female pen pal. We discourage romantic involvement on the part of the prisoner and our pen pals. We do not want any of our pen pals to be burdened with this kind of behavior and we will intervene to end the pen pal relationship if this happens.

## **PARENTAL PERMISSION**

We recommend our pen pals to be at least 18 years of age. If under 21, we ask that a parent or guardian sign the application form indicating they are aware that their son/daughter will be writing to a prisoner.

## **ENDING A PEN PAL RELATIONSHIP**

You are free to end the pen pal relationship with your prisoner at any time. **Please notify the prisoner and the Restorative Justice Ministry of the termination and offer an explanation.** We closely monitor the letter writing of each pen pal relationship and it's important for us to know when it has ended.

## **CAREFUL CONSIDERATION**

As you can see from these guidelines, correspondence with an inmate is a ministry that should be undertaken only after careful, prayerful consideration and requires continuing care and mature discernment. Nevertheless, our experience indicates that volunteers who follow these guidelines and who seek spiritual counsel as appropriate during the pen pal relationship will be richly rewarded with the knowledge that they have made a positive impact for the Kingdom.

## **DO'S & DON'TS FOR PEN PALS**

### **DO:**

Write at least once a month.

Use your first name only on the envelope and in the letter.

Include the **prisoners number** after his name on the envelope. The prison will reject the letter and send it back if the prisoner's number is not on the envelope.

Use the Restorative Justice Ministry, a PO Box or your parish office as a return address.

Encourage your prisoner to take responsibility for the harm they have caused to their victim.

Be aware that your prisoner may have emotional ups and downs. You can provide some emotional stability. Depression is common among prisoners and they sometimes stop writing for a while.

Be aware of con games and notify us if you feel manipulated in any way.

If your prisoner pen pal is of the opposite sex, be prepared for romantic flirting.

Respond to need as your prisoner presents it to you, without projecting your own assumptions into your prisoners situation.

Small donations of money in the form of a money order are allowed, after first contacting the Restorative Justice Ministry.

### **DON'T**

Out of respect for the prisoner, do not ask what their crime is. If he volunteers the information, know that he is doing so out of deep trust for you.

Don't give legal advise regarding your prisoners case.

Don't agree to visit your prisoner.

Don't give your prisoner your phone number.

Don't sign loans or pay an inmates legal fees.

Don't send photos except for a group shot.

Don't give your prisoner other names and addresses to write to.

**PRISONER PEN PAL PROGRAM**  
**Diocese of Lansing**  
**VOLUNTEER APPLICATION**  
updated 1-5-05

Date of Application: \_\_\_\_\_

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

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

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

\_\_\_\_\_

Phone (day): \_\_\_\_\_

Phone (evening): \_\_\_\_\_

E-Mail Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Catholic \_\_\_\_\_ Protestant \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

Religious: \_\_\_\_\_ Single: \_\_\_\_\_ Married: \_\_\_\_\_

Spouses Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Parish: \_\_\_\_\_

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

Number of years at parish: \_\_\_\_\_

Male: \_\_\_\_\_ Female: \_\_\_\_\_

Education: HS \_\_\_\_\_ AA \_\_\_\_\_ BA/BS \_\_\_\_\_ Masters \_\_\_\_\_ Ph.D \_\_\_\_\_

Major: \_\_\_\_\_

Career/Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Employer: \_\_\_\_\_

REASONS FOR WANTING TO BE A PEN PAL

**The return address you will use is:**

Restorative Justice Office: \_\_\_\_\_

PO Box: \_\_\_\_\_

Parish: \_\_\_\_\_

We recommend our pen pals to at least 18 years of age. If under 21, we ask that a parent or guardian sign this application form indicating they are aware that their son/daughter will be writing to a prisoner. Sign below if you have carefully read our guidelines, do's & don'ts, and can endorse our philosophy wholeheartedly.

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

Parent/Guardian Signature (if under 21): \_\_\_\_\_

Please e-mail the application to: [afowler@dioceseoflansing.org](mailto:afowler@dioceseoflansing.org)

Or mail to: Restorative Justice Ministry, 300 West Ottawa St., Lansing MI 48933  
517-342-2494