



**Yokefellow Prison Ministry
of North Carolina
Guidebook**

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Yokefellow Prison Ministry of North Carolina

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"a state-wide fellowship dedicated to the ministry of reconciliation"

Founded: 1969

Introduction

Yokefellow Prison Ministry of North Carolina is an inter-denominational, interracial Christian ministry of reconciliation begun in 1969, which includes both lay and clergy, male and female. It is founded on the idea that people's lives are changed through committed relationships.

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

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

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

Yokefellows (both "inside" and "outside") accept and live by the Yokefellow Disciplines of Prayer, Scripture Reading, Worship, Money, Service, Witness and Study, as well as a commitment to the weekly Yokefellow meeting.

The **objectives** of Yokefellow Prison Ministry are:

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

Mission Statement

In response to the call and example of Christ, Yokefellow Prison Ministry of North Carolina motivates and encourages prisoners, yoked in personal relationships with community volunteers, to examine their lives; experience the forgiveness, healing and power of God's love; and return from incarceration with a covenant commitment to, and new disciplines for, personal responsibility and contribution to family and community.

Brief History and Organization

Yokefellow Prison Ministry of North Carolina is an outgrowth of the Yokefellow movement, begun in the 1950's by the Quaker theologian and leader, Elton Trueblood. The idea is simple: Christians being yoked together for fellowship, encouragement, and mutual support.

Since 1969 Yokefellow Prison Ministry has lived out its mission statement: "to enable prisoners, yoked in personal relationship with community volunteers, to examine their lives; experience the forgiveness, healing and power of God's love; and return to family and community with a covenant commitment to personal responsibility and contribution."

We strongly believe that people's lives are changed through committed relationships. We work to make the redemptive love of Christ known through the trust and the care present in these relationships.

Each week over 800 volunteers from a variety of churches across the state conduct Yokefellow meetings for prisoners in roughly two-thirds of our state correctional facilities. Our volunteers are male and female, clergy and laity, from different racial, ethnic and denominational backgrounds. Some have served for over 30 years! – A testimony to the blessings involved in such experiences. Thousands of prisoners have found acceptance, a listening ear, an encouraging voice, and the reality of Christ's love.

Local groups are led by a volunteer Yokefellow **Group Coordinator** who takes responsibility for recruiting, supporting, and communicating with local group members, the local corrections facility staff, and the state-wide office. **Regional Coordinators** provide training and support for a cluster of individual Yokefellow groups.

Our **staff** includes a full time Executive Director; and a volunteer state-wide trainer. Our **Board of Directors** is composed individuals from across the state representing a variety of denominational backgrounds.

The annual budget is funded by a few denominational grants, but primarily through the generous gifts of local congregations and individual donors. We are a 501(c) 3 non-profit organization.

The **Annual Meeting**, held the last Saturday in October each year, provides a time of fellowship, sharing, and inspiration for Yokefellows from across the state. It is also when members of the Board of Directors are elected, the annual budget is approved, and any other necessary business is conducted.

Yokefellow Disciplines

- 1. The Discipline of Prayer.** To pray every day, preferably at the beginning of the day.
- 2. The Discipline of Scripture.** To seek God's guidance through reverent reading of the Bible every day, following a definite plan.
- 3. The Discipline of Worship.** To participate, at least once a week, in public worship of God.
- 4. The Discipline of Money.** To return to God a definite portion of my income to support the Christian cause.
- 5. The Discipline of Service.** To invest a specific amount of my time in humble acts of love and service to others.
- 6. The Discipline of Witness.** To make an unapologetic witness in daily life, daily work, daily words.
- 7. The Discipline of Study.** To become a better informed Christian by careful study of Christian books.

In addition to these seven disciplines, Yokefellows commit themselves to participate in a **weekly Yokefellow meeting** for sharing, support, encouragement and accountability for Christian growth.

Becoming a Yokefellow Volunteer

Visits

If the particular facility permits it, we highly recommend that anyone interested in being a Yokefellow volunteer make a one-time visit to a regular Yokefellow meeting at that facility. Contact the Chaplain, Program Director, or the Yokefellow group Coordinator to arrange a visit and obtain the necessary approvals.

Before the visit, the group Coordinator will provide orientation about the objectives, purposes, and format of Yokefellows. At the Yokefellow meeting the visitor will be partnered with an experienced volunteer in order to observe what happens in a Yokefellow meeting, and to be guided in how they participate.

Department of Corrections Volunteer Status

All volunteers in the prison system must complete the DOC application process, including any orientation and training that may be involved. All Yokefellow volunteers will complete this process and receive the appropriate DOC identification card before their application as a Yokefellow volunteer can be approved, and before they can begin service.

If the DOC application process does not include orientation with a unit staff person, the group Coordinator will provide basic guidelines for the new volunteer.

All Yokefellow volunteers are expected to comply with all DOC requirements and guidelines and the particular requirements of the correctional facility in which they work as a volunteer.

Application, Initial Training and Membership Card

For a new volunteer, the group Coordinator will provide initial training and orientation, which will include: completion of a Yokefellow volunteer application, review of the YPMNC Guidebook, orientation to the purpose, format and details of a weekly Yokefellow meeting. The group Coordinator will have the volunteer sign a form indicating they have received, read and understood the Guidebook and have agreed to follow Yokefellow policies and practices.

Volunteers should not attend weekly meetings until the application has been sent to the YPMNC office. The group Coordinator will issue a Yokefellow Membership Card to the volunteer. The card should be available to be presented to prison staff when the individual is serving as a Yokefellow volunteer.

Ongoing Training

Each group is encouraged to provide ongoing training for its members, with at least an annual gathering for training (apart from the regular weekly Yokefellow meetings). Group Coordinators may contact a Regional Coordinator, the State Trainer, or the YPMNC office to arrange for training.

Guidelines for Prison Ministry

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

Things to Practice

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

Things to Avoid (What NOT to do!)

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

Be Cautious About...

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

Dress Code for Volunteers

Failure to follow this dress code will be reason to deny entry:

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

¹ From the DOC Handbook for Family and Friends, 2004: "*Dresses or skirts may not be more than three (3") inches above the kneecap. Slits in skirts and dresses may not be more than three (3") above the kneecap.*"

² For items 4-9 in this list, from the DOC Handbook for Family and Friends, 2004: "*Halter tops, bare midriffs, strapless tops, tube tops, body suits, underwear-type tee shirts, tank tops, sleeveless shirts or dresses that are inappropriately revealing (a sleeveless shirt or dress is considered inappropriately revealing when the female breast or lingerie may be seen), fish net shirts, or any type of shirt or pants made with see-through fabric are NOT allowed to be worn by any visitor (male or female).*"

Yokefellow Group Covenant

Yokefellow groups are organized under the direction of Yokefellow Prison Ministry of North Carolina (YPMNC) and follow the principles that are stated in this covenant.

1. A Yokefellow group is organized and receives training which is approved by the YPMNC Board of Directors. Training may be given by: the Yokefellow State Trainer, a Regional Coordinator, a group Coordinator, or others authorized by the Board of Directors.
2. Each Yokefellow group chooses a Coordinator and Assistant Coordinator, who are approved by the Executive Director, or State-wide Trainer.
3. Yokefellow volunteers are accepted as members of YPMNC based on the following :
 - a. Yokefellow volunteers are Christian.
 - b. Yokefellow volunteers are approved by the NC Department of Corrections to work as prison volunteers, and agree to follow all DOC requirements and guidelines.
 - c. Yokefellow volunteers have completed a YPMNC membership application and received a Yokefellow Membership Card.
 - d. Yokefellow volunteers maintain active status by faithfully attending the Yokefellow Prison Ministry meetings scheduled by the group.
 - e. Yokefellow volunteers agree with the Objectives and Mission Statement of YPMNC (*Guidebook, page 3*) and live by the Yokefellow Disciplines (*Guidebook, page 4*).
4. Yokefellow volunteers agree to the following principles:
 - a. To follow the patterns, policies, and purposes of YPMNC.
 - b. To attend the annual meeting of YPMNC as often as possible.
 - c. To participate in training programs offered by the State Trainer, Regional Coordinator, and by prison Chaplains.
 - d. To cooperate at all times with prison officials and prison Chaplains.
 - e. To abide by the "Guidelines for Prison Ministry" (*Guidebook, pages 6-8*)
 - f. To support their colleagues in the ministry, working together to serve the goals of the Yokefellow group.
 - g. To tell the Yokefellow story to others, and invite them to join this ministry, or support it with their prayers and/or financial gifts.
5. Yokefellow volunteers understand that this ministry "is not focused on worship, preaching, teaching, counseling, or Bible study, but is a ministry of listening, sharing, caring, encouragement and support."

6. Yokefellow volunteers accept the following recommended format for a weekly meeting:

- a. **Pre-Meeting** Volunteers gather 10-15 minutes before the meeting to discuss details, welcome new members, sign the attendance roster, review current and future plans and pray for the meeting and one another.
- b. **Opening** (15 minutes): This may include: Inmates signing an attendance sheet. Welcome. Recognition of birthdays, new members, inmates to be released, etc. A song. Brief Scripture reading. A reading from Yokefellow materials. Introduction of the theme of topic for the meeting, if any. (Sometimes a circle is formed for Opening).
- c. **Sharing** (30-45 minutes): Table groups of 3-6 inmates and 1-2 volunteers are formed to share about the topic for the night, or anything else, as appropriate. If there are two volunteers, one is the leader. This is a listening ministry. Avoid: criticism, judging, giving advice, interrupting, doing all the talking, and breaking confidentiality. Work at: being respectful and considerate, helping people talk and share, including everyone, when one is speaking the rest are listening, etc. Encourage (but do not force) everyone to take part.
- d. **Fellowship** (10-15 minutes): The group leader will call the sharing time to an end and invite everyone to share in fellowship and refreshments (if available). At this time, volunteers may visit with inmates who were not in their sharing group, or may talk individually with anyone.
- e. **Closing** (5-10 minutes): Announcements as needed. Thanks to everyone for participating. Sharing of brief prayer requests. (This is not a time to give a testimony or witness.) Closing prayer, by the Coordinator or a Yokefellow volunteer. (Sometimes a circle is formed for the Closing.) Please conclude the meeting on time and leave promptly after the meeting.

Note: Times are suggested and will need to be adjusted to fit the schedule at any particular prison facility. Adjust other parts of the meeting before taking time away from the Sharing portion.

The Role of the Yokefellow Group Coordinator (and Assistant Coordinator)

A Yokefellow Group Coordinator is responsible for the following:

- Praying for this ministry, and the members of the Yokefellow group, asking God to use the group and its members as instruments of God's love and reconciliation.
- Maintaining an up-to-date list of Yokefellow volunteers in their group and sharing that list (and any changes) with the YPMNC office.
- Maintaining the meeting attendance records for volunteers in their group.
- Planning for the weekly Yokefellow meeting, including:
 - Contacting group members about the meeting or any changes in the schedule, plans or meeting place.
 - Planning the agenda or schedule for the meeting.
 - Arranging for refreshments (if any).
 - Arriving early for set-up and preparation.
 - Leading the meeting, or assigning leadership to another volunteer.
 - Concluding the meeting on time.
 - Making sure that any clean up is completed.
- Providing initial training and orientation to new Yokefellow volunteers, including review of the Guidebook and completion of a Yokefellow member information form (to be sent to the YPMNC office.)
- Ordering membership, education, and other materials (Yokefellow cards and pins, etc.) for volunteers and inmates from the YPMNC office.
- Working with the Chaplain or Program Director of the prison to arrange one-time visits for those considering becoming Yokefellow volunteers; to coordinate DOC training and approval of volunteers; and to stay up to date with DOC and local facility requirements.
- Being the primary contact to communicate with the prison Chaplain and/or Program Director about anything related to the Yokefellow group and its ministry.

Assistant Group Coordinators help with the above responsibilities as asked by the Group Coordinator, and are ready to take these responsibilities, if the Coordinator is not able to do them.

Regional Coordinator

Regional Coordinators are appointed by the YPMNC Board of Directors and work in close relationship with the Executive Director and the State Trainer.

Responsibilities are:

- Praying for this ministry, and the Yokefellow groups and coordinators in their region, asking God to use them as instruments of God's love and reconciliation.
- Plan, organize, and lead an annual gathering for Yokefellow groups in the region for training, sharing, and support.
- Contact Yokefellow group coordinators in the region at least quarterly (in person, via telephone, via e-mail, by note or letter) to check in, answer questions, and provide support and consultation.
- Remind group coordinators of their responsibilities to:
 - Update their volunteer list each year and send it to the YPMNC office no later than January 31.
 - Send a volunteer information form to the YPMNC office for each new volunteer that joins the group.
 - Send in an update form for any group member that has a change of address or contact information.

As time and personal circumstance permit, the following are encouraged:

- To provide training and orientation to group coordinators and Yokefellow volunteers in the region, in coordination with the State Trainer.
- To be ambassadors for Yokefellow Prison Ministry, ready to share information, answer questions, and to interpret this ministry to church and community groups in the region.
- To occasionally provide encouragement and gratitude for faithful volunteers directly to their local congregation on behalf of Yokefellow Prison Ministry of NC.