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Illustration by fran\_kie

## **Mutual Spiritual Accompaniment Inside and Outside Prison**

As Friends, we strive for “oneness.” What does that mean if part of the body of a yearly meeting is living behind prison walls, unable to fully participate in the life of the meeting? How do we nourish mutual spiritual accompaniment in such circumstances?

In New York Yearly Meeting (NYYM), Friends strive to create a reality where prison ministry flows in two directions between incarcerated Quakers and Quakers in the free world. There are a number of Quaker worship groups in our yearly meeting in maximum- and medium-security prisons designated for men. (We currently have no worship groups in women’s prisons, never having reached the minimum threshold of registered women Quakers required to start a new group.) In our prison worship groups, people inside prison who identify as Friends gather together on a regular schedule with Friends from the outside. Inside and outside Friends have been worshiping together in this way for almost 50 years under the care of the NYYM Prisons Committee. We have also developed a correspondence program grounded in mutual ministry called the Inside Outside Letter Writing Collective. And a little over a year ago, the NYYM Aging Consultation and Help (ARCH) Program hired me as coordinator for prisons. ARCH models the practice of mutual support and ministering to each other as we age together in our faith community. This staff position for prisons is another way that our yearly meeting has created a spiritual bridge between incarcerated Friends and outside Friends.

Prisons are designed to separate us, and it requires a certain level of intentionality to engage in this mutual ministry across prison walls. Quakers have a core belief that there is that of God in everyone and so are primed to enter into relationships that are grounded in the Spirit. Relationships of mutual spiritual accompaniment are sustained by deep and careful listening, and are reciprocal and horizontal in nature, with both participants giving and receiving support and wisdom. Being in fellowship and interacting with one another requires commitment and creativity from both inside and outside Friends. For the practice of mutual prison ministry to be sustainable, it needs to be prioritized and supported.

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My first in-person connection with incarcerated Friends came in 2006 when I received a clear message from Spirit to “get thee behind the walls.” It didn’t come in the comfortable space of expectant waiting in silent worship; it was a smack-upside-the-head kind of message that could not be ignored. I responded by joining the worship group at Sing Sing Correctional Facility in Ossining, New York. I recall my apprehension the first time I pulled into the parking lot and saw the massive concrete prison walls and the watchtowers occupied by armed correctional officers. What would I experience in this other world?

At Sing Sing, the worship group meets at 8:30 on Sunday mornings in a small classroom off the auditorium. Volunteers arrive at the prison by 7:20 a.m. to be processed through security and transported to the auditorium for worship. The first time I arrived at the Quaker classroom, it was already set up for worship with a circle of chairs. The coffee was brewing and approximately 15 people were in place for worship. After warm greetings to us three volunteers, the clerk of the meeting (an inside Friend) invited us to settle into worship. The silence was deep in contrast to the noise of prison. The intense energy and anxiety of the journey to this space melted away as we were joined in the Spirit. After silent worship, we proceeded to check in. I was surprised at the level of vulnerability in the group.

The men were open about their lives. Over the ensuing weeks, I shared a difficult situation that I was struggling with, and I felt supported and held in the

Light. There was palpable spiritual accompaniment here, with deep levels of trust.

The precious connections formed during Sunday worship have to stop there. With stringent protocols regarding communication between inside Friends and DOCCS (Department of Corrections and Community Supervision) volunteers beyond regular worship time, volunteers cannot meet members of the worship group in the visiting room, speak to them on the telephone, or correspond with them in any way. Deviation from the rules can lead to loss of volunteer status. As with so many DOCCS policies and practices, these directives are deemed necessary in the service of security. But the impact is to isolate people on the inside from their faith community. This impact is felt deeply by all concerned.

Over the years, some outside Friends who are not registered as DOCCS volunteers have worked to stay in touch with people on the inside by sending cards and letters, and by connecting in the visiting room. In 2017 a State of the Meeting report was received from one of our worship groups that made it clear how deeply inside Friends were feeling their isolation from the body of the yearly meeting. The report stated that “Inside Friends know there is an active Quaker world outside. But we feel invisible—part of our Friends community but unable to be fully in it—like ghosts. Friends inside feel extremely isolated, but they will not give up.”

Reading that message sent from behind the walls was a wake-up call. While our small and dedicated team of DOCCS volunteers were engaged in a ministry of presence by worshiping with inside Friends, the circle of care needed to be expanded. The NYYM Prisons Committee has since developed a letter writing program guided by the principles of mutual spiritual accompaniment. Inside Friends who participate are either members of a worship group currently, or have been in the past. For example, Joseph signed up early on:

I was first introduced to the Religious Society of Friends while I was in Sing Sing prison in 2015. My last three prisons didn't have a Quaker meeting, and I only get my “Quaker-Fix” via my *Friends Journal*, but I assure you that it is not the same as Fellowship, which I am desperately missing. I would love to be able to correspond with a Friend, because quite frankly it is terrible not to be able to connect with like-minded people during this trying time of mine. I would love to be added to the list of Friends behind the wall to be linked with a Friend who can keep my spirits lifted, and I can do the same for them.

The mutuality of the Inside Outside Letter Writing Collective is critical. Rather than the outside Friends throwing a lifeline to the person inside, there is a call to experience being together on a journey. When Friends share their joys and concerns, they build trust over time. Authentic sharing of life experiences, difficult circumstances, and spiritual paths gives correspondents the opportunity to listen deeply and hold each other in prayer.



Drawing by a member of Inside Outside Letter Writing Collective, Corey Devon Arthur. Used with permission.

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The Inside Outside Letter Writing Collective was developed in collaboration with inside Friends and is now in its second year with more than 120 participants. Rob has been corresponding for over a year:

Just as a bridge can join two sides of a river, the Inside Outside Letter Writing Collective can link the humanity and compassion of one person with that of a fellow citizen. I enjoy with great anticipation receiving correspondence from my letter writer. It brings a touch of the outside to my insular world. We speak of our faith, current events, our daily lives, and now that we have built a level of trust and admiration, we speak of our personal hopes and dreams for the future. I am grateful for our connection. I have the sense that we are truly building a bridge between two sides of a river.

NYYM is developing further intentional ways to integrate incarcerated Friends into the body and hear their voices. For example, as the ARCH coordinator for prisons (and no longer a DOCCS volunteer), I provide ongoing communication and liaison with the clerks of our prison worship groups. Serving the members of the worship groups has been challenging during the

pandemic, since COVID-19 restrictions have prevented volunteers from entering facilities and worship has been suspended. During this difficult time, I have been able to keep the worship groups updated on the business of the yearly meeting and provide a listening ear. Inside Friends have been particularly interested to hear about the advocacy efforts of the yearly meeting concerning compassionate release of elders from prison; parole reform; and the landmark Humane Alternatives to Long-Term Solitary Confinement Act (HALT), which has ended solitary confinement in New York State. Where possible, I have also coordinated input from inside Friends and shared their ministry with the body. For example, it is our practice to hold extended worship to help discern emerging directions within the yearly meeting. This meeting for discernment is guided by queries which have been shared ahead of time with the worship groups and their ministry, then read to body during worship.

Another way that inside and outside Friends connect in the Spirit is through our own form of “virtual” worship. While those of us on the outside have had the option during the pandemic to worship via Zoom, this technology is not available for inside worshipping. By setting up joint worship times when Friends on the inside worship at the same time as Friends on the outside, we have been able to gather together in the Spirit and know that, as a community of practice, we are joined in prayer.

The experience of mutual spiritual accompaniment can be transformational. Being open to that of God in another person, listening deeply and being heard, and holding space for another as a spiritual practice builds bridges. Being in relationship with incarcerated people has impacted my ministry in profound ways. I now identify as a prison abolitionist, and I stumble along a path to racial justice. Sitting in the worship circle at Sing Sing as one of only three or four White people called me to examine the systemic racism of the criminal legal system and demanded that I begin to interrogate my role in White supremacist systems. As other NYYM Friends inside and outside of prison have experienced joyful connection through mutual spiritual accompaniment, I trust that they have also experienced shifts in their perspectives on the world. I hope that these relationships grounded in mutual ministry can pave the way to justice as Friends see each other with new eyes.