



## PURPOSE

I write this letter to propose a new ministry pilot program called 'Stories of Hope' through the non-profit "Continue the Story." This ministry is guided towards parents who are incarcerated and help build stronger relationships with their children. When a parent is incarcerated it places a hardship on their child and in some cases a hardship with the parent who is incarcerated.

I would like to propose a new way of building a network of communication that would last longer than just one visit. I would like to continue the story between those in prison and their child(ren) by giving the imprisoned parents the ability to be video recorded reading a story book that will be placed on a DVD and sent along with the book and a stuffed animal to their child(ren) so they can follow along and read with their mom or dad.

## WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

With prison population on the rise, it is increasing the number of children that are without a parent. There are over 2.7 million children who have a parent behind bars. That is 1 in every 28 children. When a child has a parent who is in prison there are many short-term and long-term effects on them. Here are just some of the effects that the children face:

- "Children between the ages of 2-6 can feel separation anxiety, impaired socio-emotional development, traumatic stress and even survivor guilt;
- Children between the ages of 7-10 may experience developmental regressions, poor self-concept, acute traumatic stress reactions, and impaired ability to overcome future trauma;
- Children between the ages of 11-14 may experience rejection on limits of behavior and trauma-reactive behaviors;
- Children between the ages of 15-18 may express a premature termination of dependency relationship with parents, and it may lead them to intergenerational crime and incarceration."<sup>1</sup>

There is a huge need to allow the story to continue between the child and their incarcerated parent. If we can create another means of communication, we may be able to reduce the trauma that children are introduced to. A stronger family relationship may allow the child to know that everything will be okay. They will understand and know that mommy or daddy still loves them very much.

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<sup>1</sup> Prison Fellowship Ministries

Above and beyond the effect that this ministry may have on the children, there is potential for this ministry to also help reduce the recidivism rate<sup>2</sup>. According to a study Children of Incarcerated Children by the National Conference of State Legislatures some “research indicates that visiting is important in maintaining parent-child relationships and increases the likelihood of successful reunification after release. With regard to prisoners themselves, several studies found that maintenance of family ties during incarceration is linked to post-release success.” This gives those in prison something to fight for, and will increase their chance to fight harder when they face the oppressions once outside the walls with optimism and positivity. It becomes bigger than just them, and gives a face to the fight to show the doubtful world that they can become an integral part of society.

Unfortunately, visitations are not always a possibility with some families. Rising travel costs and/or finding time to travel among other reasons have made it so only “59% of fathers and 58% of mothers had no personal visits from any of their children.”<sup>3</sup> Part of the reason for this is because “62% of parents in state prisons and 84% of parents in federal prisons are held over 100 miles away from their residence.”<sup>4</sup> With public transportation not being made available to many prisons, many families are left with the decision of placing food on the table for their children or keeping a strong bond for their children.

This also places an unnecessary burden on the parent/guardian who is taking care of the child. They are having to be a sole provider while trying to do all they can to maintain a relationship that the odds are against them.

## HOW WE CAN HELP

Continue the Story wants to build a ministry that allows those in prison who have had good behavior the opportunity to apply to be a part of a Pilot Program called “Stories of Hope.” We plan to work within the hours of operation of the prison and provide a bi-weekly opportunity to video record 3-4 inmates reading a story/bedtime story to their child(ren). The video will then be sent to the child(ren) on a DVD so they can watch their mom or dad read to them. If a family does not have access to a DVD player then one will be provided as well. The book along with a stuffed animal will be sent to the child(ren) so they can read and follow along to the bedtime story. This also provides younger children who typically develop learning disabilities when a parent is arrested to develop stronger reading skills while having time to bond with their parent. We want this to be a gift from their parent who is prison, so everything will be mailed to the children as if it were sent from their parent not from Continue the Story.

To take away the fear and anxiety that the Prison culture has on children, we would like to have a white/black back drop to make it look like a normal studio and not a prison. If allowed we

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<sup>2</sup> Recidivism Rates: A measurement of the rate at which offenders commit other crimes, either by arrest or conviction baselines, after being released from prison.

<sup>3</sup> Children and Families of the Incarcerated Fact Sheet by Rutgers University.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

would like to provide additional clothing (just for the video) that the parent can wear if they would like to, so their children do not have to see them in prison clothing.

We all have a story. Some of our stories have taken a detour and led us into the legal system to spend time behind bars. Some of our stories never even make us think twice about the legal system. However, no matter your past, you have a story that can change lives. Your story may be what is needed to stop others from making the same choices. More importantly, we have additional people who are in our story. Our families are effected by our choices and though we must live with the consequences of our choices, we can always strive to learn from them and grow from them. Our stories are never over. I want everyone within the prison system to know that there is hope on the other side of the walls. Their story may be on temporary loop but one day they will see the outside of the walls and I want them to know their story will begin again. They will have the decisions on how they want their story to end.

More importantly, we want their stories to include their children. We want to create an opportunity for them to make a positive change in the world – starting with their children. They have the power still to speak life into their children and teach them and see them become the young men and women that will go one to change the world.

Our stories are stories of redemption and reconciliation. The book of Isaiah says “Fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name: you are mine. You are precious and honored in my sight... because I love you” (Isaiah 43:1b, 4).

Those who are currently incarcerated are redeemed. They are loved. Often though, they forget this as the family unit begins to crumble. “Continue the Story” is able to begin the conversation for those incarcerated to know that they are redeemed by God, and that their choices and actions today can introduce forgiveness and love with their children.

## **COSTS**

There would be no cost to the prison system with the addition of this ministry. All funds and equipment would be provided by Continue the Story. We would use volunteers to come in and record the inmates and allow them to share a story. We would like to have an opportunity to hand out applications to participate that would have them answer some questions.

We would start with inmates who would be released within the next 3-4 years. If the child’s parent or guardian does not agree to this, then we will inform the inmate that at this time we are unable to allow them to be a part of this ministry, but we can revisit in the later months.

The equipment we would be requesting to bring into the prisons would be the following:

- Video Camera
- Tripod of Camera
- Lighting System
- Backdrop
- Clothing for Inmates
- Handful of books to choose from

- Laptop to download video files to
- Booklet with images of stuffed animals for parents to choose from

All costs of “Stories of Hope” would be absorbed through Continue the Story; a 501(c)3 non-profit organization.

## CONCLUSION

We have the ability to extend communication with families in a low cost and unique way that can be re-watched over and over and build the foundations for stronger family bonds. If this Pilot Program were to be adopted on a long term basis, then it opens the doors for a long-term study to take place. The results we may be able to see are as follows:

- Reduction in child trauma when a parent is incarcerated;
- Reduction in recidivism rates of those currently incarcerated;
- The strengthening of family relationships.

Our stories are important. The children of incarcerated parents are important. If we can create a program that reduces both the child trauma and recidivism rates, we may be able to see the day that Ohio can proudly say we have a recidivism rate that is under 15%; under 10%; or even under 5%!

I would love to discuss with you further the opportunity of bringing Continue the Story into your Correctional Facility. Together in partnership, we may lead the way for a radical change in the lives and families of the incarcerated and for the state of Ohio.

God Bless!

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