

On Earth

as it is in Heaven



Discussion Guide

A FOUR PART TEACHING SERIES ON JUSTICE

SCOTT HIGGINS



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Rev. Scott Higgins

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Contents

'On Earth as it is in Heaven' Discussion Guide.....	1
Start the Discussion.....	1
Format for each discussion.....	2
Your Story.....	2
Their Story.....	2
God's Story.....	2
Our New Story.....	2
Pray.....	2
Notes for Group Leaders.....	3
Discussion 1: People from a refugee background.....	4
Your Story.....	4
Their Story.....	4
The Global Refugee Crisis.....	5
God's Story.....	6
Our New Story.....	7
Pray.....	7
Discussion 2: People experiencing homelessness.....	8
Your Story.....	8
Their Story.....	8
Homelessness in Australia.....	9
God's Story.....	9
Our New Story.....	10
Pray.....	10
Discussion 3: People living with a mental health condition.....	12
Your Story.....	12
Their Story.....	12
Mental Health in Australia.....	13
God's Story.....	14
Our New Story.....	14
Pray.....	14
Discussion 4: People exiting the prison system.....	16
Your Story.....	16
Their Story.....	17
Prison in Australia.....	17
God's Story.....	18
Our New Story.....	19
Pray.....	19
End Notes.....	20

‘On Earth as it is in Heaven’ Discussion Guide

Justice and mercy are integral to Christianity. When the prophet Micah posed the question, “What does the Lord require of you?” the answer was that God calls us to “...act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8), Jesus restated Micah’s summary when he noted that for all their religiosity the Pharisees “neglected the more important matters of the law: justice, mercy and faithfulness” (Matthew 23:23).

The Bible has a distinctive approach to justice. Justice is part of God’s work to set the world to rights. It involves retribution when wrong is done, but it is far broader than this. Justice is concerned not only with retribution against those who do wrong, but with the restoration of those who have been wronged. More often than not, when the Bible focuses on those who have been wronged it refers to the poor, the orphan, the widow and the foreigner residing in Israel. They are not wronged by petty crime, but by the people at the centre of society! The elites whose lust for power and greed for material gain, lead them to violate the right of all human beings to live faithfully before God, to enjoy the good things God has provided on the earth and to enjoy the blessings of community.

Start the Discussion

These four discussion starters follow the Bible’s lead by focusing upon groups of people who, more often than not, are found at the margins of our society. Over the course of four weeks you have the opportunity to discuss what it means for us to act with justice and mercy toward people from a refugee background, people who are experiencing homelessness, people living with mental health issues, and people exiting the prison system.

The discussion guide can be completed in a small group setting, or a number of groups could come together in a larger workshop format to discuss the issues. If you would like a Baptist Care SA staff member to facilitate a large group workshop, please contact Baptist Care SA to arrange this. There is a lot of ground that can be covered in each study, so you are likely to require at least 60 minutes.

At the end of the series you might like to meet for an additional week to discuss where you as individuals and a group could go from here. Is there a particular set of actions your group wants to implement? Is there a particular group of people your group wants to support in an ongoing way? We would encourage you to put your learnings into action as we seek to “do justice” together.

Format for each discussion

Each discussion uses the following:

Your Story

There are four studies focusing on four groups of people living in our community who may be considered vulnerable. They are: people from a refugee background, people experiencing homelessness, people living with mental health issues, and people exiting the prison system.

- » Each study begins with group members identifying their own thoughts, feelings and attitudes toward the vulnerable group of people who are the focus of discussion in that study.

The aim of this part of the study is not to open up debate between participants, rather it is to appreciate what each person thinks and feels about the issue and to hear why they hold these thoughts and feelings.

- » You should then complete questions 1 and 2

Their Story

Watch the video and listen to the story of a person who has the lived experience of the vulnerable people group on which your study is focused, and examine some key statistics about this group.

This will help you grow in your understanding of the issues faced by these people. It will help put a human face to those issues, so you can empathise with them and consider how you speak about them, and perhaps recognise where perceptions may have been incorrect.

- » Complete questions 3 and 4

God's Story

Explore how the issues are played out in Scripture, and particularly, how they are played out in the life and teaching of Jesus.

- » Complete questions 5 and 6

Our New Story

In the light of what you have seen and heard about people at the margins or the bottom of our society, and your learning from Scripture, ask yourself what does this mean in practice for your life and your church's life as followers of Jesus.

- » Complete question 7 (and 8 for the study on people experiencing homelessness)

Pray

Each discussion guide ends with an opportunity to learn a little about the ways Baptist Care SA works with the vulnerable group you are focusing on for that week, and asks you to pray for the effectiveness of these ministries.

It would be great if you would hand out the Prayer Card for the vulnerable group you are focusing on for that week to encourage your group to continue to pray for these people and the ministries supporting them.

Notes for Group Leaders

1. You will need to bring blank cards and marker pens each week. You should have enough for each person to use five blank cards.
2. You will need to guide the discussion:
 - Remind people that questions 1 and 2 in the "Your Story" part of each discussion are not to open up a debate, rather they are to hear each person's starting perspective on that issue and people group. If participants seek to launch into debate during these questions, the group leader needs to bring them back to the task of 'just listening to one another'.
 - Encourage people to use the first person pronoun. That is "I think...", "I feel..." so they own their own views. When participants use generalised language such as "We think..." or "We feel..." and make generalised and categorical statements such as "All refugees are..." it has the potential to spark debate and shuts down discussion. The use of "I language" opens up discussions.
 - Make sure that every participant is invited to contribute without forcing them to. Your group will have some very talkative participants and others will be quiet. At times you may need to invite people into the conversation with comments such as, "Jenny hasn't said much, so it would be good to hear what she has to offer us. Jenny, would you like to share your views?"
 - There is a lot of ground to be covered in each study, so allow at least 60 minutes to enable free conversation that keeps the discussion flowing so that you are able to get to the end of that study.

Discussion 1: On Earth as it is in Heaven

People from a refugee background

Introduction

We live in a world in which more than 65 million people have been displaced from their homes by violence and persecution. For example, in the last five years half the population of Syria have fled their homes, as their country is wracked by war.¹ In 2017, over 750,000 Rohingya people fled Myanmar (formerly Burma) after the military destroyed their villages and attacked and killed their people.²

More than 25 million people have not only fled their homes, but have fled their home-country. If they return, they face the prospect of death, ongoing destruction of their property, and imprisonment. These are some of the world's refugees and asylum seekers.³

In this study we explore the plight of people from a refugee background and consider a biblically shaped response to these people and their situation.

Your Story

1. Your group leader will give you three cards. On each card write a word or phrase that sums up something you believe to be true about refugees, and/or that you have heard people say about refugees. Share your responses with the group. Place your cards on the floor or on a table where everyone can see them. As each person shares, you may find yourself wanting to discuss what they have written. At this stage you are asked to simply listen respectfully to each other.
2. Have you been a refugee or have you had anything to do with refugees?
 - » How has this shaped your views?
 - » If you have had very little personal experience with refugees, what are the main things influencing your current perspective?

Their Story

Share the story of a person from a refugee background.

View the 7 minute film, "A Life on Hold". You can locate it at <https://vimeo.com/36908352>.

3. Spend some time discussing what stood out to you:
 - » How does Omar's story challenge you?
 - » Which of the cards you created for question 1 would you remove or modify?
 - » What new cards would you add?

4. Read through the information box “The Global Refugee Crisis”:
 - » What stands out to you?
 - » How does this information challenge you?
 - » Which of the cards you created for question 1 would you remove or modify?
 - » What new cards would you add?

The Global Refugee Crisis

What makes a person a refugee?

A refugee is a person who is outside his or her home country and unable to return due to a well-founded fear of persecution. She may be rich or poor, highly educated or with little formal education. The issue is not wealth or education, but persecution. Will this person be safe from unjust discrimination, imprisonment, violence, etc. if they return to their home country? A person is called a “refugee” only after the authorities in the country to which they have fled are satisfied that they would be persecuted if they returned to their home country.

A small number of nations host a large number of refugees

Refugees tend to flee to a country that borders their own. Given Syria, Afghanistan and South Sudan have been the source of most of the world’s refugees in recent years, countries with which they share a border are also the countries that host the most refugees. In 2016 the ten nations hosting the most refugees were:

1. Turkey(borders Syria)	2.9 million
2. Pakistan (borders Afghanistan)	1.4 million
3. Lebanon (borders Syria)	1 million
4. Iran (borders Afghanistan)	980,000
5. Uganda (borders South Sudan)	941,000
6. Ethiopia (borders South Sudan)	792,000
7. Jordan(borders Syria)	685,000
8. Germany	669,000
9. DR Congo (borders South Sudan)	452,000
10. Kenya (borders South Sudan)	451,000

Table⁴

Australia, being an island/continent nation, somewhat distant from global conflict centres, hosts relatively few refugees (Australia ranked 45th in 2016, taking 42,000 refugees) and has relatively few people arriving at its borders seeking asylum.⁵

The burgeoning crisis

It is impossible for any single country or even a handful of countries to resolve the refugee crisis. Rather, we need the international community to work together to protect refugees from further persecution. The current international protection system assumes two things:

1. People fleeing persecution should be offered protection. No refugee should be sent back to the country in which they will be persecuted, but should be offered an opportunity to build a decent life;⁶
2. Members of the international community should share the responsibility. Countries that have relatively few refugees arriving at their borders seeking asylum, should offer to resettle a fair share of the world's refugees.⁷

Unfortunately, neither of these is actively pursued. Many countries, including Australia, have chosen not to offer protection to people arriving at their borders seeking refuge. And in most years less than 1 percent of the world's refugees are offered the opportunity to resettle in a third country.⁸ This means that for the last decade and longer, the number of refugees who are provided with a pathway to a new life, is much lower than the number of people who become refugees for the first time. Therefore the number of refugees globally continues to grow.

(See <http://www.unhcr.org/en-au/figures-at-a-glance.html> for statistics)

God's Story

5. A refugee is a person who flees their home country because of persecution and for whom it is unsafe to return. The vast majority flee to a nearby country, where they wait, often for many years, until it is safe for them to return home. Jesus and his parents experienced this exact pattern. Read the account (Matthew 2:1-23):
 - » How does this story help you understand what it is to be a refugee?
 - » Review once more the statements on the cards created during question 1.
 - » Which of these would you modify or remove?
 - » What new cards would you like to add?
6. Read the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37):
 - » Do you think this is applicable to our response to refugees?
 - » If the refugee is like the man beaten and left to die, who are the priests, Levites and Samaritans in our world today?

Our New Story

7. For Australians there are a number of issues to consider with regard to refugees. These include:
 - a. How many refugees should Australia resettle from overseas?
 - b. Is it fair to refuse entry to refugees who arrive by boat?
 - c. What will we do about those refugees who we sent to Manus Island and Nauru that are living in terrible conditions?
 - d. How can we best care for those refugees who are in Australia?

It is impossible for you to cover off each of these areas in this study select two areas, including the last question, and discuss what you personally and your church collectively can do.

Pray

Read through the description of what Baptist Care SA is doing to work with refugees and asylum seekers and spend some time praying for their ministry.

Would you like to befriend a person from a refugee or asylum seeker background?

An introduction to Baptist Care SA's Friendship Program.

Settling into a new country can be full of challenges. Baptist Care SA's Friendship Program gives people the opportunity to extend a warm, friendly welcome to someone from a refugee or asylum seeker background who is settling into Adelaide. Just six hours per month (for six months) can make a huge difference in their lives - and enrich your own. You meet at a time and place that suits you both.

Together you can...

- Meet for coffee or to share a meal
- Practise conversational English
- Learn about each other's culture
- Help them adjust to life in Adelaide

"What I've learnt from participating in Baptist Care SA's Friendship Program is that I gained just as much as my refugee friend. I'd really encourage others to be involved because it's very rewarding and it's a good way to contribute to making somebody feel welcome and comfortable in Australia," Kyra, Friendship Program participant.

Free interactive training is provided in Salisbury or the city, which also gives you the opportunity to connect with other volunteers in the program.

For more information, please contact Baptist Care SA's Friendship Program Coordinator Bryan Hughes on **0466 776 501** or email volunteer@baptistcaresa.org.au.

For more client stories both written and video, and more ways to connect with Baptist Care SA visit the website: baptistcaresa.org.au/onearth.

Discussion 2: On Earth as it is in Heaven

People experiencing homelessness

Introduction

To have a “home” is to have a place where we feel safe, secure and loved. To have a place where we feel we belong. Yet more than 100,000 Australians are currently homeless.⁹

In this study we explore the nature of homelessness and a biblically shaped response to it.

Your Story

1. When you think of someone who is “homeless” what are the first three things that come to mind? Write one thought on each of the three cards you have been given, then share your answers with the group.
2. What personal experience have you had with homelessness or with people who are homeless?
 - » How has this shaped your views?
 - » If you have had very little personal experience, what are the main things that have influenced your views?

Their Story

Tyrone, a person experiencing homelessness, shares his story.

View the short film “My Name is Tyrone” at <https://vimeo.com/71969053>.

3. Spend some time discussing what stood out to you:
 - » How does Tyrone’s story challenge you?
 - » Which of the cards you created for question 1 would you remove or modify?
 - » What new cards would you add?
4. Read through the information box “Homelessness in Australia”
 - » What stands out to you?
 - » How does this information challenge you?
 - » Which of the cards you created for question 1 would you remove or modify?
 - » What new cards would you add?

Homelessness in Australia

Homelessness is more than “rooflessness”. It is the absence of a home, a place to live where you can experience a sense of safety, security, permanence and belonging. It includes people who are unable to access adequate housing. For example, people experiencing homelessness may live on the streets, in their car, couch surf from friend to friend etc.

- On any given night in Australia, there are 1 in 200 people experiencing homelessness.¹⁰ More than one-quarter of them are children and young people under the age of 18 years.¹¹
- 7 percent of people experiencing homelessness live on the streets; 18 percent live in supported accommodation; 15 percent live temporarily with other households; 15 percent live in boarding houses; and 44 percent live in severely overcrowded accommodation.¹²
- The number of people experiencing homelessness in Australia is rising. There were 102,439 people experiencing homelessness in Australia in 2011 compared with 116,427 people in 2016. This is an increase of 5 percent.¹³
- The major reasons people experience homelessness are: 24 percent domestic and family abuse; 20 percent financial difficulties; 16 percent housing crisis; 11 percent inadequate or inappropriate dwellings; 8 percent relationship breakdown; 5 percent housing affordability stress; 16 percent other reasons.¹⁴
- In 2016 there were 6,203 people experiencing homelessness in South Australia. More than half were found in just six local government areas: Adelaide, Charles Sturt, Onkaparinga, Playford, Port Adelaide Enfield, and Salisbury.¹⁵

The impacts of homelessness on an individual include difficulties in maintaining study or employment, health problems and exclusion from participating in social and recreational opportunities in a community. Homelessness financially impacts Australia’s economy as people experiencing homelessness are more likely to interact with a number of government agencies.¹⁶

God’s Story

5. According to the Gospels, Jesus experienced homelessness at various points in his life. It was customary in ancient Israel for people to take travelers into their homes and offer them hospitality. Such hospitality was sometimes extended to Jesus, but at other times it was not.

*A scribe came up and said to him, 'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.'
And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests;
but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.'*

Matthew 8:19-20 (RSV)

6. Read the story of a blind man in Luke 18:35-43. Think about the ways Jesus responded to Bartimaeus and how this contrasted with the way the crowd treated him. What insights does this provide for how we might approach people experiencing homelessness?

Our New Story

7. The next time you are confronted with a homeless person begging on the street, how can you respond to them in a way that respects their worth and dignity as a person loved by God and created in God's image?
8. If our society is to effectively tackle homelessness, we need to address the immediate causes of homelessness and the wider issue of housing affordability. In March 2018 an alliance of organisations, including Baptist Care Australia, launched the "Everybody's Home" campaign. They argue that in order to address homelessness we need to address the problem of housing affordability. It calls for the Federal Government to:¹⁷
 - Reset the tax system around housing so that it prioritises first home buyers over investors;
 - Develop a national housing strategy to make available 500,000 socially affordable houses (i.e. rented at 20 percent or more below market rates) that will be required by 2026;
 - Make renting fairer and provide more rent assistance while the 500,000 affordable houses are being built;
 - Develop a national action plan to end homelessness by 2030 which:
 - » "addresses all the drivers of homelessness, including the lack of affordable housing, poverty and family violence;
 - » rapidly rehouses people experiencing homelessness and helps them stay housed;
 - » addresses the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing homelessness; and
 - » commits to ending homelessness by 2030 by taking action to prevent homelessness by delivering rapid access to housing and support people that are needed when people do lose their own home."

What could your group/church do to support this campaign?

Pray

Read through the description of what Baptist Care SA is doing for people who are, or are at risk of, experiencing homelessness. Spend some time praying for their ministry.

A warm welcome and a safe place.

An introduction to Baptist Care SA's Homelessness Services.

Today in South Australia, almost 1 in 70 people are struggling to find a safe place to call home. A third of these are children. Housing stress, unemployment, family breakdown, violence and mental health conditions are key factors.

Each year Baptist Care SA's services to people experiencing homelessness provide 35,000 nutritious meals, close to 5,000 bed nights and more than 900 emergency relief parcels. These go hand in hand with a range of other vital services supporting vulnerable people at risk of homelessness to have access to the basics.

Our services to people experiencing homelessness provide:

- Food and relief
- Showers, laundry and health care
- Support and accommodation

Carl walked free from gaol with \$30 in his pocket and accommodation arranged for the next two nights. Two weeks later, he was homeless. Statistics for ex-offenders show Carl's story is all too common. Crisis payments struggle to cover the cost of board and for Carl, there was the added expense of cancer-related treatment.

"Baptist Care SA supports people who want to change, and they do, and that's important work. (Baptist Care SA) not only gave me a safe place, they gave me an opportunity to help myself. That's what matters. I really don't know where I'd be without those guys."

There are a number of different volunteer opportunities at our Inner City site, including volunteering with Homeless Youth, serving food at our WestCare Centre, assisting with Emergency Relief, assisting with administration tasks, property maintenance and pastoral care.

If you are 18-30 years of age with passion for helping other's and making a difference, you may be interested in joining our Urban Learning Community. This is a great opportunity to be mentored by experienced Urban Ministry Practitioners, to live in the inner city and to volunteer at Baptist Care SA's Inner City site. \$100 cost per week covers board and all utilities.

For more information on all volunteering opportunities, please contact our Volunteer Coordinator Bryan Hughes on **0466 776 501** or email volunteer@baptistcaresa.org.au.

If you would like to donate to our current appeal, visit baptistcaresa.org.au/get-involved/donate.

For more client stories both written and video, and more ways to connect with Baptist Care SA visit the website: baptistcaresa.org.au/onearth.

Discussion 3: On Earth as it is in Heaven

People living with mental health issues

Introduction

Mental health conditions affect around 3.2 million Australians in a 12 month period, however only three percent of the whole population will experience a severe mental health disorder that has a profound effect on the person's capacity to live a productive and enjoyable life.¹⁸ Social isolation is a known catalyst to poor mental health.¹⁹ Therefore the challenge to improve mental health within our community starts by contesting our culture of individualism and promote authentic, welcoming, connected and inclusive community that accepts and includes everyone.²⁰ The significance of meaningful relationships, solid community connections, and the ability to actively participate in community life are known to facilitate the person's recovery. Social inclusion is less about 'programs' and more about people living in supportive, engaged and relational community.

In this discussion we will explore the effect of living with mental health issues and a biblically shaped response to it.

Your Story

1. When you think of someone who is "mentally ill" what are the first three things that come to mind? Write one thought on each of the three cards you have been given, then share your answers with the group.
2. What personal experiences have you, or someone you know, had of living with mental health issues?
 - » How has this shaped your views?
 - » If you have had very little personal experience, what are the main things that have influenced your views?

Their Story

A person living with a mental health condition shares their story.

View the 7.5 minute video "It's only 1/100th of me – Amy" via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3lrk2dWgwdg>

3. Spend some time discussing what stood out to you:
 - » How does Amy's story challenge you?
 - » Which of the cards you created for question 1 would you remove or modify?
 - » What new cards would you add?
4. Read through the information box "Mental Health in Australia":
 - » What stands out to you?
 - » How does this information challenge you?
 - » Which of the cards you created for question 1 would you remove or modify?
 - » What new cards would you add?

Mental Health in Australia

A large proportion of Australians will experience mental health issues at some stage during their life. Yet it is still surrounded by stigma that can make it difficult for people to be open about their experiences.

- Mental health disorders are common. Almost half the population (45 percent) experience a mental health disorder at some point in their life. 1 in 5 Australians age 16–85 years will experience a mental health disorder in any given year.²¹
- The most common mental health disorders are anxiety disorders (14 percent population); depressive disorders (6 percent) and substance use disorders (5 percent).²²
- Schizophrenia causes intense episodes of psychosis involving delusions and hallucinations, and longer periods of reduced expression, motivation and functioning. People living with Schizophrenia are no more likely to be violent than anyone else. Up to 1 in 100 people experience Schizophrenia.²³
- Obsessive–Compulsive Disorder causes intrusive, unwanted thoughts, images or urges that are very distressing (obsessions) that the person experiencing this condition tries to relieve via repetitive thoughts or behaviours (compulsions). Up to 1 in 50 Australians are affected by OCD.²⁴
- People with Bipolar Disorder can become euphoric, over-excited, reckless, or imagine that they are more important or influential than they are in real life. They can also become extremely low, feeling helpless, sad and depressed, with difficulty making decisions or concentrating. Some people experience mainly the high or euphoric state while others experience mainly the lows, and some experience both extremes, becoming profoundly depressed or over-excited. The person may then behave in an uncharacteristically irrational or risky manner. Up to 1 in 50 Australians develop Bipolar Disorder at some stage in their life.²⁵
- The World Health Organisation estimates that depression will be the leading health concern in the world by 2030.²⁶
- Every day seven Australians die due to suicide and another 170 will attempt suicide.²⁷

God's Story

5. The Bible tells a number of stories about people who suffered what we would identify as mental illness. King Saul appeared to be overcome with depressive episodes (1 Samuel 16:14-23), while the prophet Elijah, exhausted by his conflict with Ahab and Jezebel, lost the will to live, developing a distorted view of reality and his place within it (1 Kings 19:1-17). What do these episodes teach us about living with a mental health condition?
6. Christians sometimes quote the biblical command to “not be anxious about anything” (Philippians 4:6) to suggest Christians should always experience peace of mind. Yet on the night of his arrest Jesus was said to be in such anguish that he was sweating blood (Luke 22:44). While hanging on the cross Jesus cried the anguished prayer of Psalm 22:1

“My God, My God why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).

- » How do you make sense of Philippians 4:4-7 in the light of this?
- » What does the experience of Jesus suggest about how we respond to people in a state of emotional crisis?

Our New Story

7. Assuming the pattern of 1 in 5 people experiencing mental illness is true of your community and your church, what can you and your church do to remove any stigma around mental health conditions and better support people experiencing such conditions?

Pray

Read through the description of what Baptist Care SA is doing working with people living with mental health conditions and their families, and spend some time praying for their ministries.

Healthy minds for children, young people and families.

An introduction to Baptist Care SA's Family Mental Health Support Services.

Baptist Care SA's Family Mental Health Support Services (FMHSS) provide support for young people aged 0-18 years and their families. We work with individuals and their families, as well as using targeted therapeutic group work. We focus on early intervention and prevention of mental health issues.

We work with individuals and their families to:

- Build individual strengths
- Expand family resources
- Develop a greater sense of connection to community

This is a free service and referrals can be made by anyone in the community including schools, early learning centres, health workers, community organisations and self-referrals.

Ewan was a 10 year old with a lot of anger. He told us he felt as if he didn't matter after his sister was born. We worked with Ewan, focusing on his strengths and discovered his sense of humour. Ewan became more confident and cheerful.

His relationship with his parents improved. One day, he announced he didn't need us anymore because he felt so much better!

Baptist Care SA welcomes volunteers who are interested in representing the FMHSS team on the phone and at reception. For more information, please contact our Volunteer Coordinator Bryan Hughes on **0466 776 501** or email volunteer@baptistcaresa.org.au.

For more client stories both written and video, and more ways to connect with Baptist Care SA visit the website: baptistcaresa.org.au/onearth.

If you would like to use a specific tool to share hope with a friend who is living with mental illness, Baptist Care SA has produced the '21 day Hope Pack', which is a tool that uses a friend to journey alongside a person living with a mental illness such as depression. The Hope Pack is scripture focused and encourages the person to action life-giving healthy behaviours that will help them move toward wellness.

For more information contact: churchsupport-team@baptistcaresa.org.au



Discussion 4: On Earth as it is in Heaven

People exiting the prison system

Introduction

Prisoners are defined “as adults aged 18 years or over held in custody, whose confinement was the responsibility of a corrective services agency. This definition includes sentenced prisoners and prisoners held in custody awaiting trial or sentencing (remandees)”²⁸. It excludes juvenile offenders, people held in police cells, immigration detention centres, or psychiatric custody.²⁹

The demographics of people in prison in Australia is different to the population in general. People arriving at prison often have high rates of mental health issues and chronic health conditions, and high rates of alcohol and drug use. These significant and complex health needs may improve during their prison term.³⁰

Recidivism is the tendency for people who have been convicted of an offense to reoffend. “In Australia overall, 44.8 percent of prisoners released during 2014-15 returned to prison within two years (to 2016-17)”, South Australia has the lowest rate of recidivism in Australia at 36.2 percent at present.³¹

In this discussion we will follow John’s story,³² which is subtitled ‘A man learns to love himself and his freedom after over forty years inside Australia’s youth detention centres and prisons’. In the video John tells his story of three decades of moves in and out of addiction, prison and rehabilitation facilities/programs before he is released from the addictions. It demonstrates that ‘the opposite of addiction is not sobriety... it is human connection.’³³

In this discussion, we explore the effect of living in, and exiting the prison system, and a biblically shaped response to it.

Your Story

1. When you think of someone who is leaving prison, what are the first three things that come in to your mind. Write one thought on each of the three cards you have been given, then share your answers with the group.
2. What personal experience have you had with prison, or with someone who has been imprisoned?
 - » How has it shaped your views?
 - » If you have had very little personal experience, what are the main things that have influenced your views?

Their Story

Today we focus on John's story as he moved in and out of prison for over 40 years.

View the video "John's Story" at <https://vimeo.com/216351951>.

1. Spend some time discussing what stood out to you:
 - » How does John's story challenge you?
 - » Which of the cards you created for question 1 would you remove or modify?
 - » What new cards would you add?

4. Read through the information box "Prison in Australia":
 - » What stands out to you?
 - » How does this information challenge you?
 - » Which of the cards you created for question 1 would you remove or modify?
 - » What new cards would you add?

Prison in Australia

Australia is one of a number of countries that imprison people as punishment for particular crimes. Prison punishes people by removing their freedom. For some the experience can be transformative and lead them to commence a new way of living when they are released. For others the experience has little impact, and for some they may even become more criminalised from the experience.³⁴

- At June 13, 2017 there were 41,202 prisoners in Australian prisons: 37,905 males and 3299 females; 7/10 prisoners were sentenced, 3/10 were awaiting sentence. The four most common offences were:
 1. Acts intended to cause injury (23 percent of prison population)
 2. Illicit drug offences (15 percent)
 3. Sexual assault (12 percent)
 4. Unlawful entry with intent (10 percent).³⁵
- Males account for 92 percent of all prisoners³⁶ and are more likely to have extensive prison histories than females.³⁷
- People born overseas account for the 35 percent of the Australian population aged over 17 years but they are only 18 percent of all prisoners, while people who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders make up approximately 2 percent of Australia's population aged over 18 years but 27 percent of the prison population.³⁸
- The median age for male prisoners was 35 years and for females it was 34 years.³⁹ People aged 25–29 years had the highest imprisonment rate, followed by people aged 30–44 years.⁴⁰

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are overrepresented within the prison population. Recognised pathways to prison for these people include “poor schooling and employment, drug and alcohol issues, unstable housing, family history of incarceration, being a member of the Stolen Generation, and a lack of support during childhood, including childhood neglect and abuse.”⁴¹
- 2 in 3 people entering prison have used illicit drugs in the 12 months prior to admission to prison.⁴²
- 2 in 3 people entering prison have not completed high school education past year 10.⁴³
- 1 in 4 people in Australian prisons receive medication for mental health conditions while in prison.⁴⁴
- “Finding suitable stable accommodation is a major concern for prisoners about to be released back into the community, especially for those with no family support. Prisoners also recognise that where and with whom they live immediately after release from prison will affect their likelihood of engaging in drug and alcohol misuse, and criminal activities.”⁴⁵

God’s Story

5. In the eyes of the Jewish authorities and the Roman state, Jesus was a criminal and was executed accordingly. How might the fact that Jesus was considered a criminal impact your attitude towards people who are serving time in prison?
6. Jesus was executed as a criminal and crucified alongside two criminals (they were most likely people who had been part of bandit gangs that committed violent crimes). Read the account in Luke 23:26-43.
 - » How does the attitude of Jesus to the criminals executed alongside him contrast with the attitudes of the crowds and the Roman soldiers?
 - » What can we learn from this about a Christ-like approach to people serving prison sentences and those released from prison?

Our New Story

7. What challenges is a person who is leaving prison likely to face?
 - » How might a church come alongside these people and their families and provide support?
 - » What challenges exist for the church in doing this?
 - » How can these challenges be overcome, or worked through?

Pray

Read through the description of what Baptist Care SA is doing working with people leaving prison and spend some time praying for their ministry.

Breaking Free.

A local church-based mentoring program for ex-offenders.

The Baptist Care SA “Breaking Free” program seeks to offer local churches the opportunity to engage with men and women who have spent time in prison and are wanting to move forward with their lives.

Aims:

- To assist participants to make a healthy and productive transition from prison life back into the community
- To embrace participants and their families and welcome them into the life of the church
- To establish mentoring relationships from within the church that nurture and support participants
- To give practical assistance where needed, while encouraging responsibility and growing independence

“Every day is a decision to go in the right direction.... it wasn’t just that first initial step on to the right track that was difficult... as hard as it was to get on there, you have to put that effort in every day, just to stay on there. It is more work, but it’s more rewarding. Nothing worth having comes easy.” Trystram, ex-offender

“To observe and participate in this program has been an eye opener. Seeing the lives of participants so profoundly affected has had a big impact on me. I admire the integrity and sustainability of this program.” PS Craig Millowick (H21 Baptist Church)

Any local church who has a passion for this ministry has the potential to be involved. Please contact Baptist Care SA’s Prison Chaplain Richard Hawke for more information on **0400 108 924** or email rhawke@baptistcaresa.org.au.

For more client stories both written and video, and more ways to connect with Baptist Care SA visit the website: baptistcaresa.org.au/onearth.

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