

How to Practice the Method of Centering Prayer

The Four Guidelines of Practicing Centering Prayer

One

Before you begin, choose a sacred word as a symbol of your intention to consent to the presence and action of God within you. The sacred word is a short, one or two syllable word of your own choosing.

Two

Sit comfortably, close your eyes and begin to settle down. Take a few deep, slow breaths to help you relax and stay loose. Recall your intention to consent to the presence and action of God within you, then silently introduce your sacred word.

Three

When you get caught up in your thoughts,* return ever so gently to your sacred word. Thoughts are normal. Let them come, accept them and let them go. Do this every time thoughts come to grab your attention. Don't give up if this is hard at first. With practice, you will get better at letting go and staying present.

Four

At the end of your prayer time, remain relaxed for a couple of minutes while you come back into ordinary consciousness. The benefits of Centering Prayer gradually show up in our every day life.

*"Thoughts" is a general term which refers to ideas, feelings, emotions, memories, physical sensations, images, reflections, plans, opinions, or spiritual experiences that come to awareness — even ideas about God or Jesus. A "thought" is anything that kicks in a narrative that takes us away from our intention to be present and let go.



What are Participants saying about Centering Prayer behind the walls?

"It's been one of the best decisions I have made in my life.... I have an understanding of life and see life in a different perspective. This meditation class has made me feel at ease and most definitely I have found peace inside my soul."

Individual in custody in Division 9, Cook County Jail, Chicago, IL

What are Volunteers saying about leading Centering Prayer behind the walls?

"I entered the prison feeling the honor, privilege and responsibility to facilitate a Centering Prayer practice for inmates of the Faith-Based Dorm. I prayed as I entered that the Trinity guide me in sharing what I knew of this incredible practice. After a couple of Sundays, I realized it was not about what I was bringing to the men; it was about being one with each other experiencing the transforming movements of the Spirit within each of us."

Patty S, volunteering at a men's prison in TX

Contemplative Outreach is a worldwide network of individuals and groups committed to the process of transformation through the practice of Centering Prayer. Fr. Thomas Keating, a founding member of Contemplative Outreach, always envisioned sharing the practice inside locked facilities. The Prison Outreach Service Team of Contemplative Outreach was founded to help those affected by incarceration. We are grateful to partner with Prison Contemplative Fellowship and share their groundbreaking work in this area.

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CENTERING PRAYER AND INCARCERATION



Artwork by Z. Zen in Deer Ridge Correctional Institution, Oregon

"Centering Prayer has given me an experience of freedom. I will be forever changed. I have found who I am and am blessed to have a Centering Prayer group available to me."

NB, Folsom Women's Prison

Sharing Centering Prayer in Locked Facilities

We are excited to be bringing Centering Prayer and its benefits to a wide range of people impacted by incarceration. This resource is meant to bring information to those in prison or locked facilities, to staff, to volunteers, and to the wider Contemplative Outreach community.

Why Centering Prayer in Prison?

"In this wordless prayer of silence, we gently move from the demanding Outside God, to the loving Inside God, who loves us unconditionally."

Prison Contemplative Fellowship Website

What better way to name the beauty of Centering Prayer for those experiencing incarceration? Communion with a loving Presence is healing and transformative for all and a beautiful gift to those affected by incarceration.

Who this is for?

We intend to support those who have witnessed and attest to the benefits of Centering Prayer in locked facilities which includes staff (chaplains and others), incarcerated individuals and their families, volunteer coordinators and volunteers who share Centering Prayer within locked facilities.

How do I volunteer and is it safe?

Jails and prisons are run by local or state government except for federal prison. So the first step would be to search the Internet for: "How to volunteer in (your state) Department of Corrections." The site will direct you to the on-line volunteer application process. Groups such as COPOST and other prison ministries may be able to connect you with a prison or jail chaplain or a volunteer who can guide you through the steps.

Volunteers report that the procedures for entering a locked facility, being inside with a prayer circle and leaving a locked facility are detailed and very structured, addressing the overall concern for safety. Many volunteers often feel both at ease and aware while inside when they become familiar with the safety protocols and the people with whom they come in contact: paid staff, inmates and other volunteers.

What are staff saying about Centering Prayer in locked facilities?

"Centering Prayer fosters a relationship with God and with others in a unique and powerful way that I have not seen in other classes in the jail environment. I have had numerous individuals in custody tell me how much they had been yearning to learn a practice like this and how impactful Centering Prayer has become in their lives. The sense of peace, calm, acceptance, and love is palpable in the room at the end of each class."

Thomas Cook, Staff Chaplain with Kolbe House Jail Ministry serving Cook County Jail, Chicago, IL

"When I first met Mike, he seemed angry, discouraged about his life, and even embittered. Mike is now a regular attendee at Centering Prayer. He has a significant contemplative practice that I believe has altered his way of dealing with frustrations in his life."

Ken, working in Oregon prison

The Benefits of Centering Prayer for the Incarcerated

Starting Over

Many of us did horrific things to end up in prison. Many of us harbor emotions such as anger, frustration and conflicted feelings about the people in our lives and the choices we have made. While these feelings are normal, no one tells us how to overcome them. Centering Prayer is one of the keys to opening up our hearts to share in the love Centering brings. This allows for growth and the sharing that time alone with God gives us. Change comes over time even if we don't see it ourselves. For many of us in prison the prayer allows us to touch the anger and shame and toxic stuff in our lives so we can learn to let go and let God transform us.

New Beginnings

The practice of Centering Prayer can create a calm peace in daily life whether one is in prison or free. The gentle unloading of the unconscious during the practice allows for changes to occur over time, changes we ourselves don't often notice but others around us often do. For many it is like starting over with a new attitude.

Serenity

No matter what we have done, or who we think we are now, we have the capacity to change. Some of us feel we have reached rock bottom and are very depressed, tired and fatigued. Centering Prayer can bring a quieting of the mind. The practice brings serenity over time and helps quiet the turmoil in our minds and combat the toxic shame that we all have at some level. It can uplift us and allow us to handle daily life circumstances in better, calmer ways and overcome the anger, shame and fear many of us feel. All we need to do is our practice.

Improving Conscious Contact

Many people in recovery have found Centering Prayer to be an excellent meditation practice for improving conscious contact with the God of our understanding. Centering Prayer can become an integral part of a spiritually enriched recovery plan.

Support from COPOST

What's Inside: A Conversation on Getting Started

Please join us for a monthly discussion on Zoom with people who are experienced with this outreach and others who are new or newly interested in taking Centering Prayer inside jails or prisons. Our team will have some resources to suggest as you get started. You may find you have it within you to do this transformative work! This monthly online conversation about getting started in prisons and jails is offered via zoom. Email us or visit our website for more details.

Volunteer Support

Current volunteers taking Centering Prayer into locked facilities may join us for a monthly discussion on Zoom. Even months we offer a speaker or specific topic of interest and odd month meetings we offer a general discussion. Email us, or visit our website for more details.

Outside the Walls

We host this Centering Prayer group for those formerly incarcerated which meets on a weekly basis. The first half hour is for those desiring to say hello or ask questions, or speak about the method of Centering Prayer. Centering Prayer begins shortly after the gathering and is followed by discussion of a reading.