



Dismas
FELLOWSHIP

ORIENTATION

Our Goal For This Orientation

Is to explore briefly the prison experience and its effects on brothers and sisters as they return to community, and to explore how we can journey with them in a way that is meaningful and safe through Dismas Fellowship.

Sections:

- 1) The Prison Experience & Culture
- 2) The Inner Wounds that Prisoners Carry
- 3) Nuts & Bolts of a Dismas Fellowship
- 4) Safe & Healthy Relationships
- 5) Organizational Support for your Fellowship

What do we need to start over?



A safe
place to
live

Something
useful to do

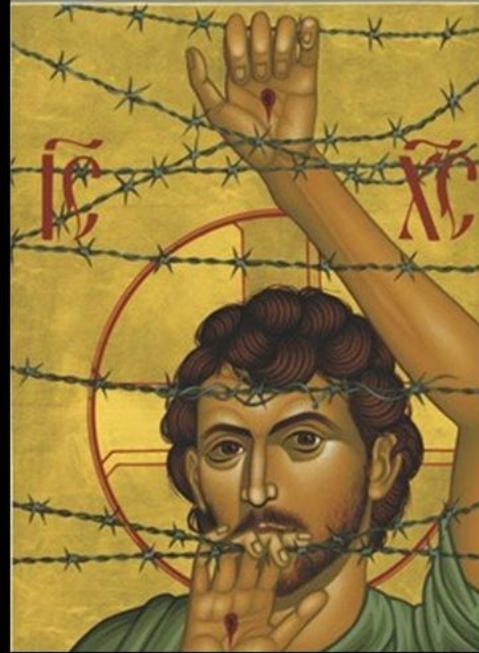
Friends!

Dismas Fellowship

is modelled after Jesus' acceptance of his fellow convict commonly called the "Good Thief".

Although based on the story of Christ's execution, Dismas

Fellowship is open to all. It is not a religious program but one of acceptance, welcome and safety without judgement ... for both ex-prisoners and community volunteers.



St. Luke 23: 39-43

WHO WAS DISMAS?

According to the Scriptures, Jesus was crucified between two thieves. One of these thieves is traditionally known as Dismas. He is commonly called the "Good Thief", "the Wise Thief" or "the Penitent Thief".

He is the one, who in a single thrust of clarity cried out to Jesus and requested, "*Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*" Jesus graciously responded to him, "*Today you shall be with me in paradise.*"

Section #1

The Prison Experience & Culture



Correctional System At A Glance

Arrest

Jail → Court → Sentence

Provincial (2 yrs or less) -or- **Federal** (2 yrs to life)

Conditional Release (with probation or parole) -or- **Warrant Expiry** (no supervision)

Community Reintegration

Dismas Fellowship (and new friends!)

The Culture of Prison



A Window Into Prison

(from “A Hard Name”)

Video #1

The Culture of Prison



- prizes “being solid”
- “do your own time” - hide feelings
- never “rat out” another inmate

... and if you’re not solid?

Section #2

The Inner Wounds That Prisoners Carry

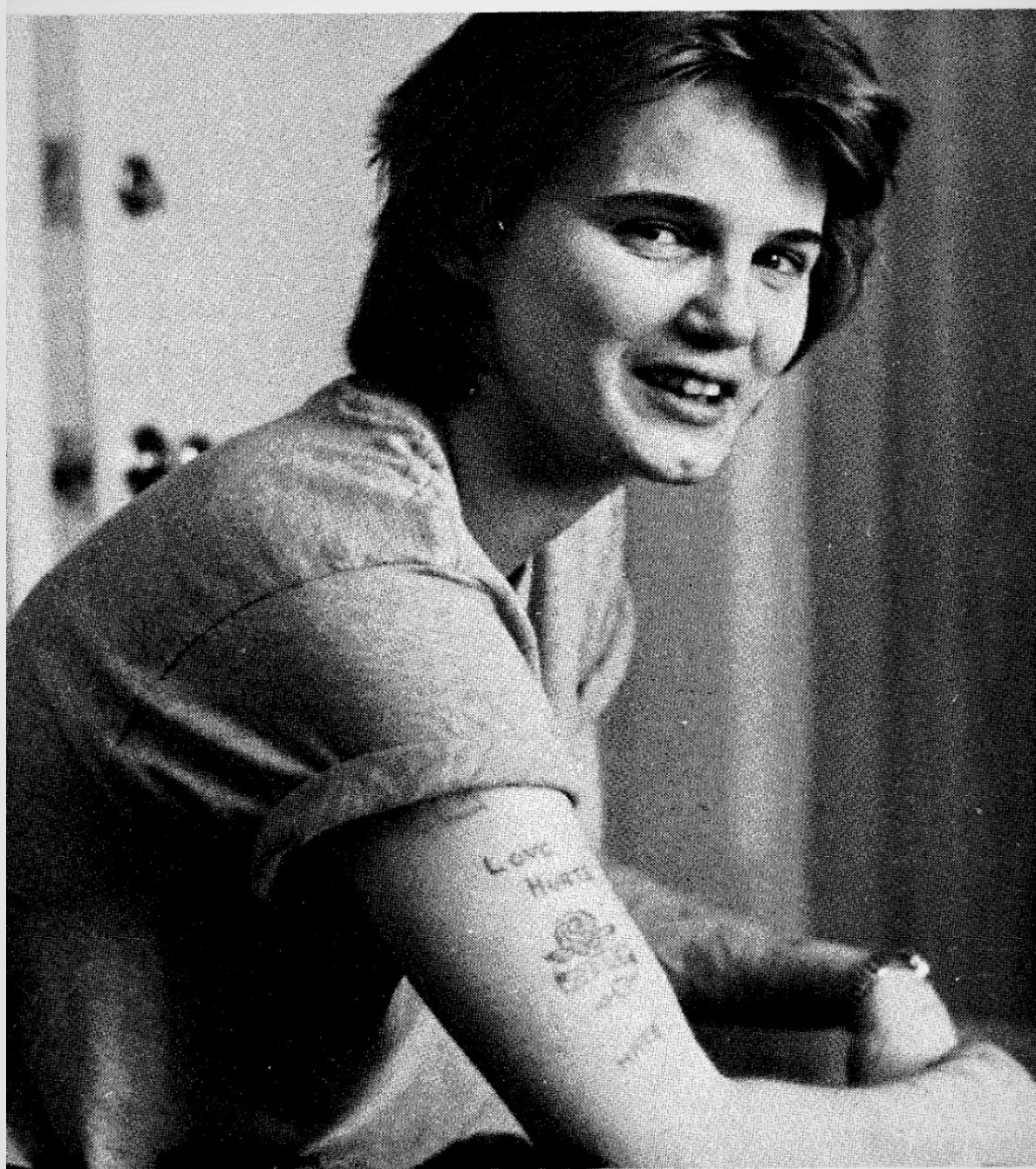


**“I feel like a cockroach
in my own country”**

(indigenous ex-prisoner)

Step Inside the Circle

Video #2



Marlene

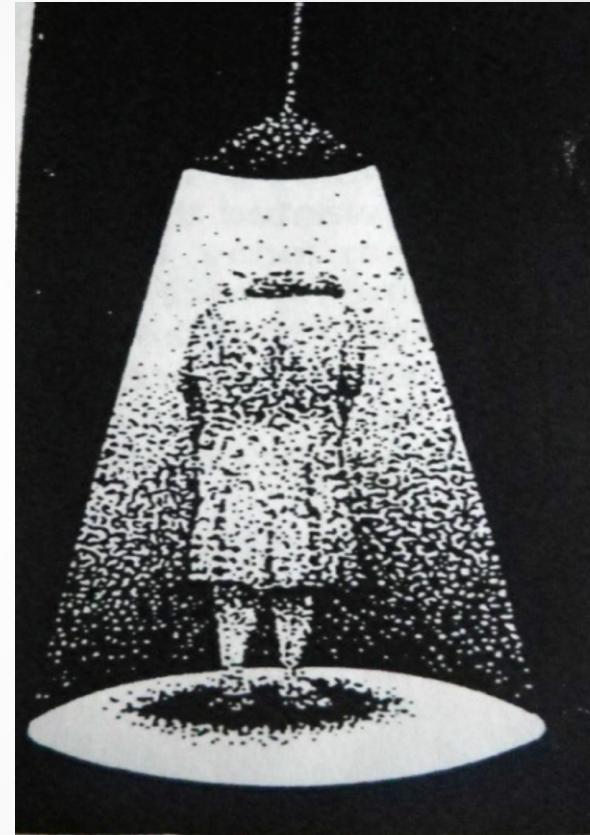
Shame:

to feel fundamentally damaged and unworthy (as opposed to feelings of guilt)

- psychiatric label
- addiction and alcoholism
- brain damage
- illiteracy
- history of abuse and trauma
- abandonment / foster care

The lingering effects of prison:

- **Difficulty making decisions (institutionalization)**
- **Suspicious / lack of trust**
- **Carry the “solid” persona into the community**
- **Stigma and deepened shame as an ex-convict**



Enter ... Dismas Fellowship:



**Providing a
community of
hope and
acceptance.**

Dismas Fellowship: A Community of Hope

**Video #3 – from an early Toronto
Dismas Fellowship Meeting**

Section #3

Nuts & Bolts of a Dismas Fellowship



- a place of safety, welcome ... without judgement
- hospitality not a program
- our model – Jesus' acceptance of his fellow convict



Dismas Fellowship is not:

- a church
- a prayer meeting
- a correctional program

Dismas Fellowship is:

- safe community
- welcome
- listening
- encounter
- friends
- celebration



Basic Guidelines For A Dismas Fellowship



- 18 years or older
- Name tags (optional - first names)
- Check with leaders before sharing phone numbers / emails
- We do not ask details of crimes or time spent in prison
- Avoid lending money
- Store valuables safely

(more guidelines in Section 5 of Toolkit)

Influences....

**12 Step
Model**



**Circle of
Trust**

**Fellowship
Meal**

Dismas
FELLOWSHIP

Basic Format (Dismas Meeting)

- **3:00 PM - Set up tables... make coffee... name tags**
- **4:30 PM - Members arriving – time for fellowship**
- **5:30 PM - Sharing our meal together**
- **6:30 PM - Begin the Circle (welcome, singing, introductions, announcements, appreciations, Dismas story, Dismas values & Dismas prayer)**
- **7:00 PM – Short Reflection (10 minutes): a personal story, a theme, a reflection question, sharing “experience, strength and hope” – sometimes in small groups (avoid preaching, “cross-talk” religious language)**
- **8:00 PM – End in a circle, sharing prayer requests and singing “Jesus, Remember Me”**

Our Shared Values

- 1) **We welcome and celebrate one another, regardless of religious or criminal convictions, knowing that we are all 'offenders'.**
- 2) **We encourage everyone to give themselves in some way – cooking meals, setting and cleaning up, sharing our truth or reaching out to others.**
- 3) **We are committed to paying our way by sharing the costs of food and accommodation.**
- 4) **In the Circle, everyone is given the opportunity to speak or to pass.**
- 5) **We will treat each other's story with confidentiality and love. Each story is sacred.**
- 6) **We are committed to being a safe and responsible fellowship with accountability to the church where our meetings are held.**
- 7) **We are committed to ministering to each other as if they were Christ.**



The Value of our "Values"

Video # 4

Our Dismas Prayer



Dear God,

In your mercy remember me and forgive me for the wrongs I've done

Set me free of my deep fears and resentments

Melt the hard places of my heart and

Allow me the grace to

Surrender this day to your loving care.

Amen

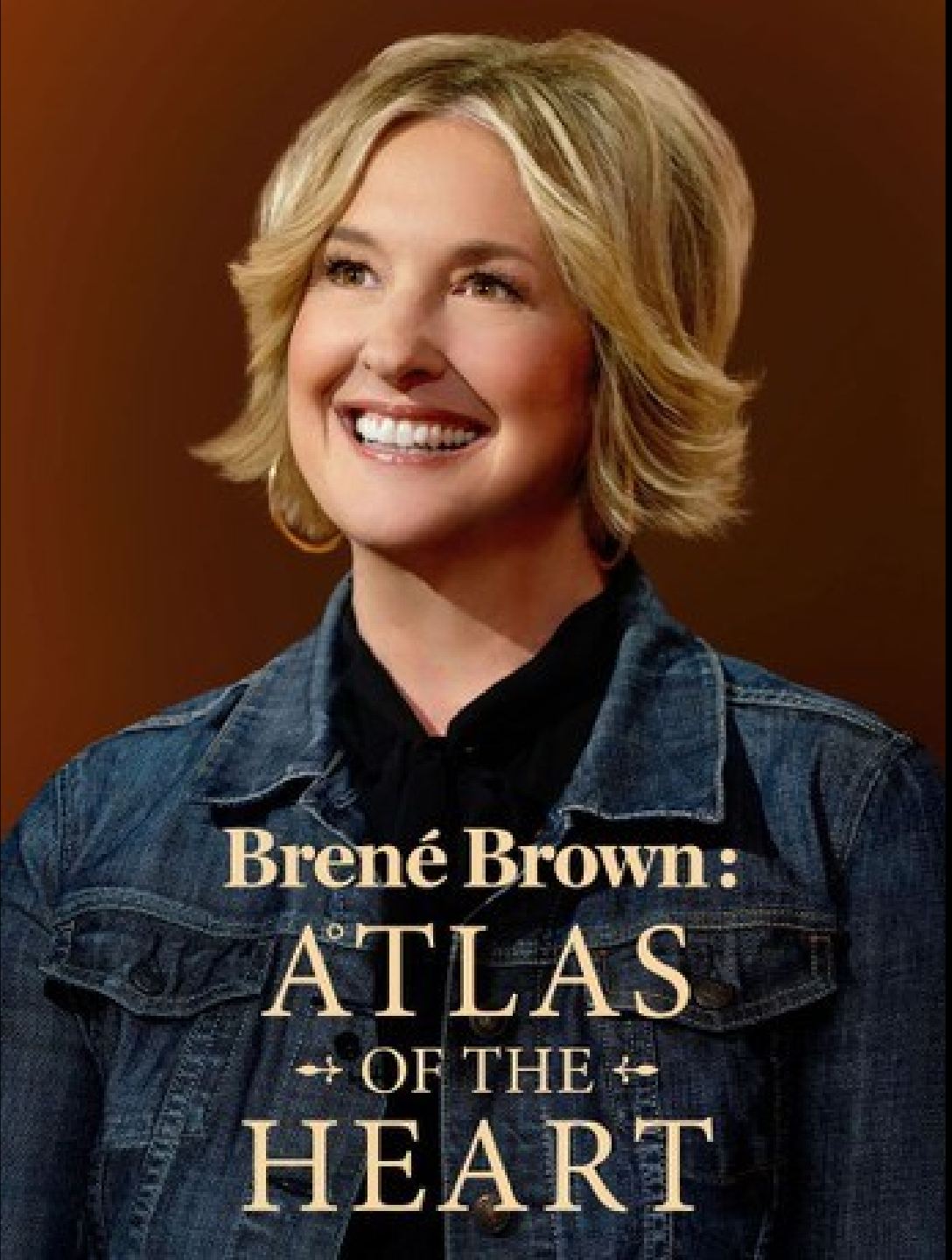
Section #4

Safe and Healthy Relationships



***“no fixing, no saving, no
advising, no setting each
other straight”***

***(Parker Palmer’s “A Hidden Wholeness”
page 114)***



“Boundaries are a prerequisite for compassion and empathy. We can’t connect with someone unless we’re clear about where we end and they begin. If there’s no autonomy between people, then there’s no compassion or empathy, just enmeshment.”

(Brené Brown – “ATLAS of the HEART”)

Friendships In Our Fellowship ... Some Guidelines

Dismas is first and foremost a “fellowship”.



We do not offer a program of sponsorship, or formal counselling or "mentoring".

Friendships In Our Fellowship ... Some Guidelines



If you want to meet with a member outside the fellowship time, please consult with a trusted leader before doing so.

especially before exchanging telephone numbers or email addresses!

Where do we meet ... can they come to my home?

At first – meet in a coffee shop or public place.

Open your home only when comfortable with doing so and after consulting with trusted leaders.

Know any conditions especially involving children or other vulnerable persons.

Check with halfway house staff before taking your friend out...especially to your home.

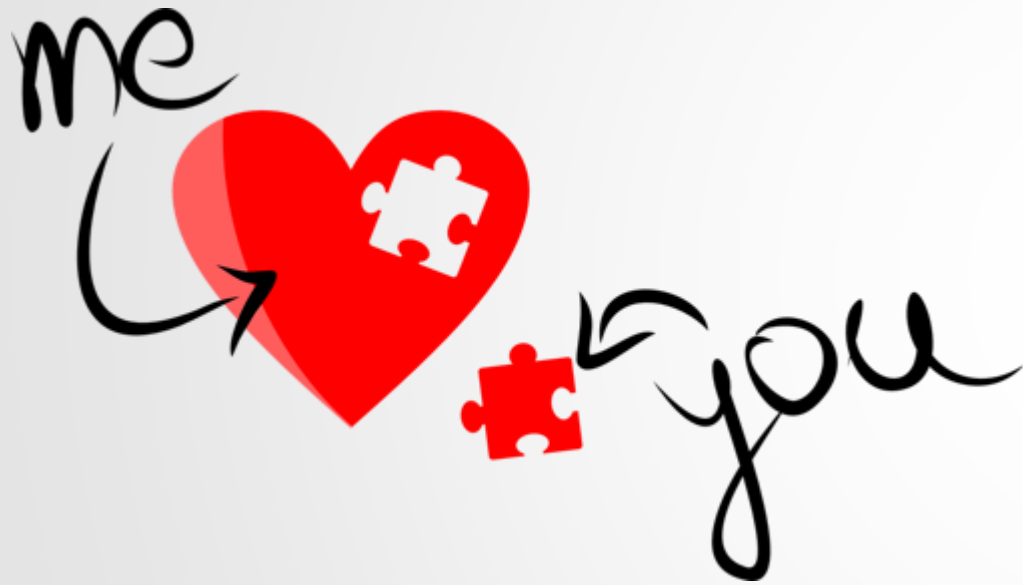




As Your Relationship Develops

- Show up faithfully
- Listen without judgment or advice
- Allow him / her to tell you about past
- Be positive...Encourage...
- Keep showing up!

... and if we become more than “friends”?



...it could be wonderful or it could be disastrous.

**Dismas is not a dating service
– talk to one of the leaders so
it's in the open...**

Mutual Respect



... or if you receive unwanted advances or any harassing behaviour, speak to Dismas leadership where it will be dealt with directly and restoratively.

Preserving Friendships

Avoid becoming

- a landlord
- or employer
- or banker

**It will almost always harm
your friendship**



What if I see my friend headed for trouble again?



Discuss your concerns with trusted leadership. You may want to confront your friend honestly about what you see happening.

What about confidentiality?

Guard the confidentiality of your conversations with your friend.

Do not reveal his or her name or details of the offences to others.



Duty To Report

But!... If you receive information that could result in self-harm or harm to others,

you will need to discuss this information with trusted leadership immediately.

Do not allow another's crisis to become your crisis. If an individual says, *"Don't tell anyone about this."* then it is likely that you are being manipulated.





Dismas Locations

**Brockville | Cambridge | Guelph | Hamilton | Kitchener | Niagara |
Sarnia | Toronto East | Toronto West | Woodstock**

*****Kingston location coming soon!*****

Section #5

Organizational Support for your Fellowship

If you are thinking of starting a new Dismas Fellowship;

- 1) Canvas Community Support**
- 2) Find a Church / Community Centre to host the meetings**
- 3) Create a Board of Directors / Steering Committee**
- 4) Reach out to Halfway Houses and Parole Office to publicize**
- 5) Find funding support including donations at the meetings**

Expectations for Groups Identifying as Dismas Fellowships

- 1) To ascribe to our Shared Values, in particular welcoming all ex-prisoners regardless of criminal convictions, knowing that we are all offenders.**
- 2) To be rooted in the faith community on a collaborative basis. Dismas Fellowship does not wish to be a project of one church or one organization alone.**
- 3) To take the Dismas Fellowship training and be willing, if necessary, to take the volunteer training required by the appropriate correctional authority.**
- 4) To attend and observe another Dismas Fellowship as part of orientation.**
- 5) To connect to the Dismas Fellowship Network and attend regular gatherings.**
- 6) To ensure appropriate liability insurance coverage for the Fellowship's activities.**

Note: The name "Dismas Fellowship" has been registered by Friends of Dismas Inc.

Father Greg Boyle

(Homeboy Industries)

Video #5



“We imagine with God a circle of compassion and we imagine that nobody is standing outside that circle.”

Fr. Greg Boyle

Homeboy Industries