

Grace Goes to Prison
Study Guide for Faith Groups

1. Marie's character was shaped by early formative experiences with her family and church, especially her time in Brethren Volunteer Service. Think about similar experiences you have had in your life. How did they shape your beliefs? How did they influence your view of the world? How do you view those experiences today?
2. Marie had thought that someday she would become a missionary in a foreign country, but discovered her mission field in the prisons of Pennsylvania. Later, in an interview, she described the work she did in prisons as "my task." What is your calling? Where has God led you, contrary to original plans?
3. An important guideline for ethical behavior is the golden rule, which is found in various forms in many faith traditions and cultures around the world. Leviticus 19:18 and Matthew 7:12 are two examples. Marie took this truth to heart and challenged her prison volunteers to be the kind of volunteer they'd want visiting them, if they were alone and forgotten by society. Do you know anyone who has been incarcerated, or who is incarcerated now? What was their experience like? How would you want to be treated in prison?
4. Talking to inmates was a challenge for Marie and the volunteers, especially when the inmates shared painful memories and revealed troubling details to crimes they had committed. It became overwhelming at times. Marie confided in her pastor, who provided much-needed counseling and perspective on a regular basis. Honest confession, as our faith traditions tell us, is cathartic—medicine for the soul. When have you spoken to a religious leader or a counselor about a burdensome issue? What aspects about the conversation made it easier for you to be transparent? Discuss with others as you feel comfortable. When is sharing our burdens with another human being easier than opening up to God? When is it more difficult? Read through the Psalms to find many examples of honest dialogue with God.
5. The therapeutic community in B Block worked to build a safe place where inmates could foster mutual respect and concern in support of one another, in spite of the selfishness and divisiveness that pervaded much of prison culture. Faith communities strive to model a similar culture—defined by living in peace and harmony and building up one another with mutual affection and honor. Romans 12:9-21 lists the marks of membership in a Christian community. How do you see these characteristics reflected in your own faith community? Where is there room for improvement? What influence could faith communities built on these values have within their neighborhoods?
6. Although Marie seldom spoke to inmates about her faith in God, her deeds of service and love spoke her faith more powerfully than words. How do you communicate your faith to others? Are there right and wrong ways to share personal beliefs? Which methods are more effective? Is there a place for evangelism in prison ministry? Is evangelism a gift given only to certain persons, as described in Ephesians 4:11-13? How would you define Marie's work with the prisoners in the Pennsylvania prison system?

7. The prison runathon became a successful alternative to incarceration, giving inmates the opportunity to do something constructive and positive while in prison. Yusef, one of the prison inmates, spoke about the way it gave him renewed motivation for personal change: “You meant to be a good son, a good husband, a good father . . . but you’ve been a speed racer on the road to hell with all your good intentions. Then along comes the runathon, giving you an opportunity to give back, to finally do something truly good, and you latch onto that opportunity for dear life.” How is doing something kind for another person an avenue for healing or growth? Where do you see God in acts of service and love? Romans 12:21 points to the transformation possible in doing good and overcoming evil: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” As imperfect human beings, how do we discern what is “good”?
8. Even in the most challenging situations, Marie firmly believed in never using violence to solve problems or end conflict. She often reminded the inmates that “it’s so important to adopt the attitude that nothing anyone could say or do would ever make you want to hurt them.” She modeled this core belief in nonviolence in her daily life and through her conflict resolution classes. What does your faith tradition say about how to mediate conflict—at individual, community, and national levels? Is violence ever a viable option? How do the guidelines found in Matthew 5:38-42 and 18:15-22 illuminate this discussion?
9. “Whatever the question, love is the answer,” Marie’s mother had always told her. Marie took this advice to heart and lived by this rule in her work with prison inmates. However, she soon found out that loving others with God’s love was a risky endeavor. How would you define this kind of love based on Marie’s relationships with the prison inmates? With the prison administrators and staff? Why was it a risk to tell prison inmates they were loved? How do we love without judgment, especially when we’re called to love our enemies? What bearing do Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:43-48 and 7:1-5 have on our discussion?
10. The PrayerMates program grew out of Marie’s belief in the power of prayer. James 5:16 states confidently that the “prayer of a person living right with God is something powerful to be reckoned with” (from *The Message*). How do you understand the power of prayer in your own life? What would it be like to be a prayer partner with a prison inmate?
11. Restorative justice is a more holistic approach to the way we deal with criminals, seeking justice (defined as *shalom*, wholeness) instead of retribution. Walter Brueggemann speaks about this type of justice in his book *Peace*: “Justice refers to securing and guaranteeing the livelihood, well-being, freedom, and dignity of every person in the community, not only those strong enough to insist on it” (p. 109). This concept of justice is found throughout Judeo-Christian biblical traditions. Compare Isaiah 61 with Luke 4:14-30. How would you define God’s vision of justice and well-being for all? In your community, who is not strong enough to secure their own dignity? What would it look like for faith communities to catch this vision of God’s *shalom* and live it out in tangible ways? How did Marie’s programs embody this understanding of justice?

12. Marie worked with the Church of the Brethren, her faith community, in advocating for the abolition of the death penalty. What does your faith tradition say about capital punishment? What is your personal opinion, and what has informed it? Which position aligns closest to God's vision of justice? What did you think and feel after you read about the execution of Keith Zettlemyer in Chapter 12?
13. Describe the way Jesus relates to the woman caught in adultery in John 8:1-11. How could the way Jesus restored this woman's dignity and relationship to the community be a model for restorative justice? How did Marie use similar principles in her work with prison inmates? How have you witnessed these principles being used effectively? Not so effectively? How could you use these principles on the school playground, with a difficult colleague at work, or in a conflict with a family member?
14. Divine- and human-initiated forgiveness is a major tenet of Jewish and Christian faith. The scriptures are replete with examples. Psalm 32 is a song of thanksgiving by an individual who has been forgiven by God. How would you describe the relationship between God and the psalm's author? What aspects of confession and forgiveness found in this psalm could be used in work with prison inmates? How would you define sin and forgiveness in relationship to God? When working in mediation between victims and offenders, what makes forgiveness so complicated (think of the story of Jenny and Dave from Chapter 14)? Do Jesus' words in Matthew 6:14-15 and 18:21-22 about forgiving others provide any help?
15. Jerry, another inmate, defined grace as God giving us what we don't deserve. The scriptures define grace in a variety of ways. Numbers 6:22-27 describes the unmerited blessing of God on Israel. Paul, in his letter to the Christians at Ephesus, talks about grace—the gift-giving nature of God that showers kindness upon us through Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:1-10). How did you witness God's grace through Marie's work with prison inmates? After reading Marie's story, how would you define grace?