

An Introduction to Religious Visits

1. Who qualifies to make a Religious Visit?

The correctional system permits a prisoner to request and receive a visit from a minister, pastor or priest, imam or person of similar standing in the religious community to which he belongs. The visit should be originated by a request from the prisoner for such a visit or visits.

2. The Security Clearance:

Each person wishing to visit a prisoner as a “religious visitor” must first obtain a security clearance. The procedure for doing so will vary from centre to centre, but initial inquiries should be made from the Visits Centre or the Chaplains’ Office. Information is not normally transferred from centre to centre, and you will need to apply separately at each centre you wish to visit.

Normally you could anticipate that you will need to provide the following information:

Full name

Date and place of birth - birth certificate – certified true copy

Full address

Home and work Phone numbers (include mobile if you have one)

Drivers licence and or passport – a certified true copy will need to be provided.

Photo (You may also be requested to provide a passport sized photo on neutral background)

Australian citizens with no police record are usually processed in 6 to 8 weeks. If checks need to be made overseas then the process can be quite protracted. Once obtained a security clearance is valid for 12 months only, and must then be reapplied for. Holding a blue card is NOT a valid security clearance.

It is possible to make “ordinary” visits to a prisoner. However, such a visit counts on the prisoner’s record of visits, and so could prevent a family member or friend from visiting. Also such visits are in the normal visits area with all other visitors. Religious visits are counted separately to general visits, and usually mean that, where possible, you will be provided with an private interview room for the visit. If the visit is classed as a Religious visit, then you will be permitted to take in limited religious material, such as a Bible and teaching material, which are not permitted in the general visits area. Not all centres have the ability to offer interview rooms, so again you will need to take it on a centre by centre basis.

2. Making a visit:

Once a security clearance is obtained then a “Religious visit” may be booked. The visits process does vary from centre to centre, but the usual points of contact are the Chaplains office or the Visits Officer. Chaplains don’t spend a lot of time in the office, as they try to circulate around the centre, but if you have difficulties ring the centre and ask to speak to the Visits booking officer and explain the problem. Normally visits need to be booked around 3 or 4 days ahead, but be sure to check each centre’s requirements.

When presenting for a visit, remember to arrive at least 30 minutes early and report to the visits area of the centre. You will need to identify yourself with an appropriate document such as a driver’s licence, birth certificate, passport.

You will not be permitted to take in articles such as mobile phones, car keys, wallets, purses, food items, money, any metal objects etc. Lockers are usually available to store these, along with your identification papers. You may also be subjected to a check by the drug-sniffer dogs, and you will normally pass through metal detectors on your way into the centre. Many shoes do contain metal strips and you may need to take them off and pass them through the x-ray machine (similar to at a major airport.)

Once in the interview room you may be locked in with the prisoner, and you will need to remain there for the whole visit period (usually one hour).

There are often consecutive visiting periods, so it may be possible to visit two or three inmates in the one morning or afternoon, if desired.

3. General information:

A good general rule is “take nothing in for an prisoner, bring nothing out for a prisoner”. If you have any items that need to go to the prisoner, pass it to the officers on duty at the Visits Centre when you first report there, addressed as follows:

Prisoner Name
C/O Reception Store.

Treat Correctional Officers with respect, and obey any direction they may give you. Do not challenge in the presence of a prisoner, any direction, decision or request that an officer gives to you. There may be circumstances of which he is unable to acquaint you in the presence of the prisoner.

Remember to maintain professional and spiritual ethical standards, especially that of confidentiality, at all times. However, if a prisoner indicates to you that he is thinking of self-harm, harming another prisoner, or escape it is essential for the safety of all concerned that you pass this information to jail staff at the first appropriate opportunity once the prisoner has left you.

If you wish to celebrate the Eucharist, Holy Communion, Lord's Supper, or other similar celebrations for which you may require wine, bread, oil or other substances not normally permitted in the visits area, special permission should be sought in advance from the General Manager. The Coordinating Chaplain will assist with this if possible.

Chaplains and religious visitors are not permitted to handle money or legal matters for prisoners.

Chaplains and religious visitors should not carry information, no matter how insignificant it may seem to you, from a prisoner in one centre to a prisoner in another centre. Also, be careful making contact with an inmate's family – you could be used to breach security or contravene a court order.

Your visit is one of pastoral and spiritual care for the prisoner. Always remember that chaplains and religious visitors are not permitted to proselytise.