

Great Commission Recruitment from the Incarcerated Don and Cathy Allsman, Completion Global July 2024

Completion Global, Inc. seeks to accelerate innovation for the Great Commission. We want to help the Church make disciples and plant indigenously-led, reproducing churches among every tribe, people, language, and nation (Rev. 7:9). We desire more than just the establishment of a single, growing church and prefer to see churches that are intentional about reproducing new churches every few years. For example, we would rather help one church of 50-75 people plant five new churches of 50-75 than see one church of 500. Our dream would be to see churches develop new leaders and new church plants every 3-5 years, spreading exponentially within each of the world's people groups.

Part of this dream is to make the world missions community aware of the tremendous opportunity to recruit effective cross-cultural workers for the harvest from America's prisons. We have seen the amazing fruit produced by the incarcerated when they have received credible biblical training and responded obediently to the Holy Spirit. As gifted ministers of the Gospel, they are effective witnesses to Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Satanists, and tribal peoples.

Mobilizing them for world missions is an important way to energize the Church to complete Jesus' task to preach the Kingdom to all ethnic groups (Mt. 24:14), represented by the 1600 remaining unengaged people groups on earth. Agencies engaging the unreached will benefit from recruiting in America's prisons.

In order for us to have credibility in recommending bona fide candidates to world missions agencies, we endorse only people who have:

- An earned certificate from a contextualized leadership development **program**
- Administered by a ministry in **conformance** with leadership development principles;
- Resulting in **authentic** sanctification in free-world (outside prison) culture, including faithful service in a local church for at least 12 months.

Program

There are several effective programs for discipleship in the prison context including (but not limited to) Crossroads Prison Ministries, Lifeline Global, and Third Millennium. But by far the most effective leadership development program is *The Capstone Curriculum*, developed by Dr. Don Davis from World Impact and The Urban Ministry Institute (<https://worldimpact.org/get-trained/church-based-seminary/>). This program has been employed since 2003 by several prison ministries in 15 states, serving thousands of prisoners.

Conformance

After visiting dozens of Capstone prison classes in several states, delivered by many prison ministries, we have observed a disparity in the quality of the leadership development when mentors deviate from The Capstone Curriculum's design. Conformance to the program's principles is essential for cultivating healthy leaders.

Authentic

The culture of prison is radically different from free-world culture. Being released from prison is as much of an adjustment as a Peruvian would face moving to Vietnam. Prisoners can be truly transformed during incarceration, and even be legitimate Christian leaders in their context, but until their sanctification is tested in free-world culture for a year, they are especially vulnerable to recidivism. While it is vital for returning citizens to be given church ministry opportunities upon release, it is dangerous to give them too much responsibility during their time of adjustment.

Six Essential Elements for Success

The Capstone Curriculum has been successful in the prison context when ministries develop leaders using the following six principles. To whatever extent there is non-compliance, or “cutting corners” with any of these six, we have observed that its effectiveness is greatly diminished. In some cases the program has become little more than a rigorous Bible study.

1. **Facilitating leaders (vs. teaching):** Leaders are best developed when the mentor/facilitator allows the prisoners to engage the material and discuss it with one another. The best leadership developers are those who ask good questions that challenge their proteges to rightly divide the Word. The least effective leadership developers are those who preach and teach too much. This program is not a “just add water” Bible study. It requires the wise guidance of an experienced follower of Christ. Over the course of 16 modules, a good facilitator will delegate an increasing workload to the students to lead and, like John the Baptist, become less and less visible. They help the prisoners to also become effective leadership developers for others.
2. **Selective admission (vs. broad admission):** The program develops leaders who have already demonstrated leadership. It is not designed to turn a non-leader into a leader, nor is it designed to lead people to Christ. It works best for leaders who want to become better leaders. When a broad admission policy is employed, the program becomes bogged down by immature and unmotivated students who poison the environment. While legal restrictions exist regarding admission, there are creative ways to be in compliance while maintaining program integrity. For example, other programs can be offered to the general population or new believers (e.g. Fight the Good Fight of Faith, developed by Dr. Davis), which can be a pre-requisite to Capstone admission. An approach like this is better than diluting The Capstone program.
3. **Three-year program length (vs. truncated exposure):** Research shows that prisoners are institutionalized within a few months of incarceration, resulting in criminal thinking in order to survive. If they have not experienced trauma before prison, they experience it shortly into their sentence. For criminal thinking to be reversed, there must be a sustained length of time marinating in the Scriptures. Since Jesus took three years to teach the apostles how to carry on His ministry, it makes sense that prisoners would also need a minimum of sustained exposure to Christian leadership development in the Capstone program. Our observation is that after the first 1.5 modules, the prisoner’s behavior actually got worse (because of pride). Then, after about one year they started to become humbler, and after three years

there was another inflection point, where the program was no longer about their achievement, but their equipping as Kingdom servants. At completion of 16 modules over 4 years, we consistently witnessed a confident humility as leaders for Christ. When this is truncated to under three years, such as the Cornerstone material, a positive foundation can be laid, but leaders will not be developed. A minimum of three years is absolutely critical for developing credible leaders.

4. **Cohort experience (vs. independent study):** One of Dr. Davis' genius design components was to insist on learning in a cohort, just as the apostles did with Jesus. They learned how to be Kingdom leaders by walking together from town to town, by reviewing the day around the fire at night, and having debates that Jesus helped them process. Prisoners also need these kinds of experiences. They also need one another for encouragement. At nearly every one of the 40+ graduations we have attended, we have heard the students say, "I would have given up long ago if not for my fellow students." For many prisoners, completion of Capstone has been the first thing they ever completed, and having done it in a cohort made the experience more formational than an individual achievement.
5. **Systematic theology (vs. inductive Bible study):** Christian leaders need the framework of the Kingdom Story in order to properly disciple people and train other leaders. Churches need to be protected against heresy, which is best done by defending the apostolic tradition that Capstone teaches. Those who simply teach Bible studies or disconnected theological topics without a point of single integration will inevitably run into problems, as we know from Church history.
6. **Visionary future (vs. low expectations):** Because prisoners can have such a low view of their abilities, they often despair about their future on the outside. Leaders are developed by the high expectations of their mentors who give them a vision for the future. Mentors who have low expectations, and who simply try to produce good citizens, will not develop leaders. If the Capstone Curriculum is used just to keep men and women from recidivism, it will not produce an identity of the kind of courage and boldness that Kingdom leaders need.

Prisoners have the best chance to become effective leaders for the Church when they have a mentor with high expectations who facilitates a cohort of motivated students in conformance with Capstone's design over at least three years of sustained engagement. When a lecturer with low expectations selectively follows the Capstone elements, delivered to the general population for less than three years, God can still bring good from it; but the conditions are sub-optimal for the development of healthy church leaders.

We are eager to help ministries start effective leadership programs using The Capstone Curriculum in additional prisons and help missions agencies recruit bona fide indigenous leaders affected by incarceration.

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