



## **Immanuel Approach with People in Jails/Prisons**

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A number of you have asked me about using the Immanuel Approach with people in Jails or prisons. Here are a few quick thoughts (to be expanded as I get more input from those of you who are getting consistently good results).

**I. Big-picture perspective:** Inmates in jails and prisons usually have a lot of trauma, and often also have poor relational maturity skills and low capacity for staying with negative emotions, so this is a challenging population to work with. Nevertheless, my assessment is that almost all recipients who participate with integrity<sup>1</sup> will have a positive experience with the Immanuel Approach if they are willing to persist with a skilled facilitator who is able to provide advanced troubleshooting when this is needed.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, my assessment is that even moderately experienced facilitators should also be able to successfully facilitate for most inmates who want to receive.

**II. Start with individual sessions, choose recipients carefully, start with “Lite” version of the Immanuel Approach:** You might occasionally find yourself in a scenario in which the Lord leads you to jump right into working with a group and/or right into trauma-healing work. However, in most situations you will want to start with individual sessions, you will want to have these initial individual sessions with one or several inmates with whom you have the most relationship and trust, and you will want to start with just the “Lite” version of the Immanuel Approach (just the initial steps of positive memory recall, deliberate appreciation, and establishing an interactive connection with Jesus).<sup>3</sup> As described in the first case study/testimony below, just spending time with Jesus and receiving comfort from Jesus can be powerful positive experiences.

Once you are getting consistently good results with Immanuel Lite, and the person feels comfortable with the initial steps in the process, you can start talking to them about the possibility of doing trauma-healing work with Jesus. Starting with at least several successful Immanuel Lite sessions will also make sure that you have a strong, reliable safety net in place. And don't move on to any kind of group exercises until you get consistently good results with these individual sessions.

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<sup>1</sup> By “participating with integrity” I mean that they are making a good-faith effort to cooperate with the process, as opposed to just pretending to cooperate in order to obtain some kind of secondary gain.

<sup>2</sup> From twenty-five years of my own experience with the Immanuel Approach, combined with reports from colleagues using the Immanuel Approach, my assessment is that 95-99% of recipients have a positive experience with the Immanuel Approach if they are willing to persist with a skilled facilitator. Note: These numbers are my personal estimate from a moderately rigorous review of both correspondence from colleagues and sessions I have facilitated. They are not results from systematic research.

<sup>3</sup> For additional explanation regarding the “Lite” version of the Immanuel Approach, see <https://www.immanuelapproach.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/ExercisesOverviewExplanatoryEssayLite-1.pdf>

**III. Group exercises:** As just mentioned above, you will want to be getting consistently good results with individual sessions before moving onto any kind of group exercises.

**A. Choose participants carefully, especially at first:** With group exercises, it will be even more important to choose participants carefully. As mentioned above, close to one-hundred percent of people who *receive* Immanuel Approach ministry are able to have a positive experience if they work with a skilled facilitator. But my observation with respect to *facilitating* is that a significant percentage of those who participate in group training exercises have difficulty, even with just Immanuel Approach Lite.<sup>4</sup>

For example, my experience with churches working to bring in the Immanuel Approach is that maybe ten to fifteen percent of those who come to training events have trouble with the practice exercises for even the first steps in the Immanuel Approach process.<sup>5</sup> My perception is that these people have some combination of cognitive difficulties, and/or low capacity, and/or poor relational maturity skills, and/or lots of trauma and triggering. My observation is that these people have trouble understanding (or holding onto) the key principles of the Immanuel Approach, and/or they have trouble tracking with the exercise handout instructions, and/or they have trouble implementing the instructions. (For example, they have trouble reading body language and other non-verbal cues, so that they frequently interrupt the recipient in the middle of interactions with Jesus. Or they have trouble with sending the body language and non-verbal cues that let the recipient know they are actively listening.) A common bottom-line observation is that during times designated for practice exercises, these people often end up just talking to their practice partner instead of facilitating.

As compared to the general population, inmates in jails and prisons will be more likely to have cognitive impairments,<sup>6</sup> they will tend to have lower emotional capacity, they will tend to have poorer relational maturity skills, and they will tend to have more trauma and triggering. So concerns about possible difficult with group practice exercises are particularly relevant. Especially as you are getting started, in order to maximize success and minimize disappointment, you will want to invite those who will be most likely to succeed as opposed to sending out a more general invitation. (Once you gather a core group of those with more capacity, better maturity skills, and less trauma and triggers, and who have had good experiences with the Immanuel Approach and are developing more skill as facilitators, you can become increasingly generous with your invitations.)

**B. Start with Immanuel Approach Lite:** Just as with individual sessions, you will want to start with the Lite version of the Immanuel Approach. It will be very helpful for group exercise participants to be comfortable with the initial steps in the process, and to be getting consistent success with the initial steps in the process, before moving on to the much more

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<sup>4</sup> This ten to twenty-five percent is just my personal rough, intuitive assessment, as opposed numbers coming from any kind of careful, systematic research. Also, this assessment is from my observations of group training exercises. My expectation is that fewer people would have difficulty if they were receiving one-on-one training.

<sup>5</sup> These estimates are from situations in which the whole congregation is encouraged to participate, as opposed to training events for only ministry teams.

<sup>6</sup> Studies show that prison inmates are significantly more likely to struggle with cognitive difficulties. See, for example, Laura M. Maruschak, Jennifer Bronson, and Mariel Alper, "Disabilities Reported by Prisoners," *Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016*, March 2021, NCJ 252642, <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/drpspi16st.pdf>

challenging work of going through trauma healing with Jesus. As just mentioned above, people in jails and prisons will tend to have less capacity, poorer maturity skills, more trauma, and more triggers than the general population. Starting with Immanuel Approach Lite will help compensate for these increased difficulties.

**C. Break the larger group into practice pairs:** Some recipients have clearer, stronger, more vivid Immanuel Approach experiences as their usual baseline, and these people usually have good success with doing exercises in a group setting where the participants all go through the exercise at the same time, and then share about their experiences at the end. Even without describing their internal experience out loud to another person at each step in the process, these people still usually have good overall outcomes – they perceive the Lord, connect with the Lord, and then interact with the Lord clearly enough and strongly enough that they have good overall experiences.

In contrast to those who usually have good experiences with group exercises that do not include dividing into small practice teams, many people (such as myself) usually do NOT have good experiences with this approach. With any kind of Immanuel Approach exercise, the internal experience for these people is usually initially very faint/vague. However, if these people go through the process with a practice pair/trio, so that they can describe their faint/vague internal experience immediately after each step in the process, then they are MUCH more able to feel the importance and recognize the meaning of subtle manifestations of the Lord's presence and subtle content from the Lord, and the overall experience is always much stronger, much more satisfying, and much more meaningful. Early in their Immanuel Approach journeys, this one piece will often make the difference between frustrating, disappointing, "it's not working" experiences with group exercises, and positive, satisfying, successful experiences.<sup>7</sup>

As mentioned above, people in jails and prisons will tend to have less capacity, poorer maturity skills, more trauma, and more triggers than the general population. Breaking the larger group into practice pairs, so that each participant can describe their experience immediately after going through each step in the process, will help compensate for these increased difficulties. Breaking the larger group into practice pairs will increase positive experiences and decrease disappointment.

**D. Full process (including trauma-healing work):** Facilitating for the full Immanuel Approach, *including trauma-healing work*, is more challenging than facilitating for just the first steps in the process. So there will be people who are able to successfully facilitate for Immanuel Approach Lite but who have difficulty with facilitating for the full process. Therefore, if/when you decide to eventually move on to group exercises that include trauma-healing work, I strongly recommend starting with a small group of participants that you have discerned to be the most well equipped. For example, those who most clearly

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<sup>7</sup> As I describe in detail in chapter sixteen of the big lion book, this benefit from working in practice pairs/trios comes from the way in which our brains have been designed to work best in community – our brains are more able to *feel the importance* and *understand the meaning* of our mental content when we describe it, out loud, to another person. These benefits will help us to perceive God's presence by helping us to feel the importance and recognize the meaning of *subtle* manifestations of God's presence *that we might otherwise miss*. And these benefits will help us to connect with God by helping us to feel the importance and recognize the meaning of *subtle* interactive content coming from God *that we might otherwise miss*.

understanding the principles, who have the most capacity for staying with negative emotions, who have the best relational maturity skills, who have the least trauma and triggering, and who are most able to stay in relational mode. Also, give yourself permission to just stay with Immanuel Approach Lite if your discernment is that the people you are working with are not yet<sup>8</sup> ready for the group exercises that include working with trauma. (Your ministry team can facilitate individual sessions in which inmates receive healing for trauma, but just stay with Immanuel Approach Lite when you lead the inmates through group exercises.)

#### IV. Case studies/testimonies:<sup>9</sup>

*A. IA session with woman in jail, June 2025:* From a participant in one of my mentoring groups:

“I'm so *immensely* thankful for the Immanuel Approach. Back twelve years ago when I was doing jail ministry, we tried to tell God's truth to the ladies we were working with but we didn't know anything that was really very helpful with the severe trauma they'd been through. (Basically everyone in jail has been through severe trauma.) Then later I went to a Biblical Counselor's Conference, but they didn't have anything that would really help the ladies in jail either. But yesterday when I did the Immanuel Approach with Susan, and saw how her face changed when she just did positive memory connect with Jesus -- it was amazing. She could feel that Jesus was happy to just walk with her, and He was able to give her comfort I bet she's never felt before in her life. (She was shocked, and described the feeling of comfort as very unfamiliar.) I'm so glad I still have contact with her and could get approved on her visitor's list!”

**NOTE:** If you are using the Immanuel Approach with people in jails or prisons, please send me a note about your experience.

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<sup>8</sup> Some who are initially not ready to facilitate trauma-healing work might eventually be able to successfully facilitate the full Immanuel Approach process if they keep studying the principles, grow their capacity, get coaching with respect to the most important relational maturity skills, and get healing to reduce trouble with triggering.

<sup>9</sup> Hopefully I will be able to add many more entries as people from the global Immanuel Approach community send in their stories from working with people in jails and prisons.