**Conversation Starters – Ideas from DC Detention Visitation Network volunteers**

*Introducing Yourself:*

* Sometimes an individual is puzzled to see a stranger visiting, and I have found it eases things to explain my motivation. For example: “Do you think it is kind of weird for a stranger to visit you? I am here because I lived abroad and the people there were very kind and welcomed me immediately into their community. There were even people who did not like the United States very much, but accepted me as an individual and treated me very well. I am here because I will never forget that generosity and I want to make sure you feel accepted and appreciated.”
* We usually start off by telling people who are new to us what DCDVN is all about emphasizing that we are there as friends.
* I would begin with my introduction and explain why I was there, then ask if the person wants to tell me a little about him- or herself, and what part of the country he or she is from.
* I always start with a new person by introducing myself and explaining that I'm part of the visitation network and that we're offering friendship and company during their confinement.

*Getting a Conversation Started:*

* I'm looking for any one topic that will make their eyes light up. I always start by asking people to tell me a little about their family, and I'll spin this out as long as they want to because it seems like it's almost always uppermost in their minds, especially kids.
  + I like to ask about whether they have children and if they do what the kids are like--and what they are good at.  Sharing kid stories is a really great bonding thing.
  + Do you have family here? Do you have family in the country you left? (Sometimes family questions can lead to some sadness but generally people like being asked about their families as they are usually important to them.)
  + Are you in contact with your parents? Do they know where you are and do you get to speak with them?
* Tell me a bit about yourself. Do you have family; hobbies? Do you have family members in the U.S. and are you in touch with them?
  + I ask what do you like to do when you are not working--do you have hobbies or sports you like to play?  What do you like to do for fun?
  + Ask what kind of work they did: “what do you do for a living when you are not
  + in detention?”
  + Tell me about your town, the place you are from.
  + Where did you live in the US?
* I found sports discussions were a good ice-breaker.
* Food is a nice safe entry point that shows you care and lets them talk about their typical food and home country only if they want to go there. Folks can talk a long time about food. :)
  + Do you like cooking? What do you like to cook?
  + How is the food?
  + What is the best food you had this past week? (Or what is the best food you've had here so far?)
  + What is the worst food you had this past week? (Or what is the worst food you've had here so far?)
  + Only if they mention food from their home country: what food have you missed the most? Probe further about it and you can share whether you have tried it. You can ask if they found any good places in the area to get authentic food – this puts them in a position of power to help you with advice.
* For topics of conversation, I try to keep it light, asking about their favorite music, food, hobbies, etc. If someone wants to talk about something like the circumstances that brought them there or what life is like in the center that's what we talk about but I don't want to dive right in if they'd rather focus on something else.

*Talking About Detention and Immigration Enforcement:*

* Sometimes people want to talk about how they are doing and conditions but other times they are happy to speak about other things.
* I'd rather the person I’m visiting brought up conditions in jail than me ... but I will ask "are you getting enough to eat?" or "are you getting any exercise?" if they don't volunteer something about jail life.
* I never ask why they're in detention. Of course it often comes up, and I usually know by the end of the conversation. From my point of view, it seems almost irrelevant given how screwy and hit or miss the whole detention system is. If I get a really unusual comment ("I did 12 years in federal prison in Spokane, Washington, and ICE was waiting for me when I was released") I'll ask first about Spokane rather than why they spent 12 years in prison.
* What is your detention story?
* How long have you been in this facility? How did you come here? What happened? (I don't typically probe further about how long they have been in country, but usually they will offer and then it's a good insight. Sometimes even if you just say "wow!!!" or just give them space they will share further, and it seems to be cathartic for them to verbalize some anxiety.)
* Are you being treated well? How are the officers? (Interestingly, they have ALWAYS answered positively to this question and so it has opened a conversation about humanity and how we are all the same, which makes the visit even more comfortable. But I guess there is a risk if the person is having problems with the officers since we can't do much.)
  + Do you have recreation here and what kind of recreation?
  + Do you have books in your language that you can read?
  + Do you receive pastoral care visits if you request them? For Muslims: do you have a place and time when you can pray? Are you visited by an Imam?
  + Are you able to sleep okay here?
* Do you prefer to spend your time alone or do you have some friends in your unit? (This lets them talk about usually preferring to spend time alone because they are afraid to trust others and don't want to get mixed in trouble, but also lets them express that they appreciate the visit from a stranger since it is a safer outlet to express feelings.)
* Do you have a court date? (I have found that since this is the most tangible next step in their lives they are quite eager to talk about how soon or far away it is. If rapport is established, you can follow up by asking if they are feeling okay about it. If they don't want to talk, they will say yes I'm okay. If they do want to talk, they will share their confidence or hope or fear, and usually will finish by sharing their sense of peace that the result is in God's hands.)
* I always ask whether they have a lawyer, usually late on in the conversation. I ask when the last time was they talked to their lawyer. I ask when their next hearing is coming up.

*Talking About Travel and Intercultural Exchange:*

* What surprised you about the United States? Was it different than you expected?
* Remember how many different kinds of people and different opinions and beliefs there are in your home country? It is the same here and I hope you know there are many people in the United States who care about you and are grateful for your hard work. I'm sorry if you experienced discrimination.
* I often ask if they've traveled much. You get the most unexpected answers sometimes. It helps that I can talk about Europe and people are often curious about England. I sometimes ask where people would go if they could go anywhere in the world (favorite answer so far: Norway).
* We have had interesting conversations with people about what it was like in their home country or things that they have done here in the US.

*Handling Distress and Sharing Prayers:*

* If the person seems unhappy or distressed, one can simply say: “Tell me what’s going on.” Just listening without too much opinion is also helpful.
* If you ask if the person is open to it and they say it's ok, then it helps me to pray either silently or together with them.

Finally, I guess I just try to squeeze in somewhere: "somos hermanos", which just shows that the intention of the visit is not necessarily religious or political or self-serving, but just to express love.