

Our Faith and the Criminal Justice System

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“When I was in prison....”

Deeply connected to the recently renewed dialogue about the criminal justice system and the pressing need to address the reality of mass incarceration are issues at the core of our faith tradition. Our understandings of justice, healing, restoration, reconciliation, redemption and transformation are important spiritual resources for us as we wrestle with these issues. Indeed, as people of faith, we are called to this conversation in a significant way, on multiple levels of systemic change, public policy change and individual change.

The teachings of the Gospel particularly challenge us to engage these realities in ways that take us beyond the surface and into true encounter with Jesus. In Matthew we hear Jesus proclaiming, “When I was in prison, you visited me.” It is easy to glide past these words, but their import is powerful.

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In the lives and faces of those who fall into the criminal justice system, we encounter Christ. Even in the midst of profound brokenness. We are challenged to seek out the image of God in this complex and challenging context. We cannot enter the conversation at arms-length. Because we are followers of Jesus, we are called to be present as ambassadors of healing, restoration and justice in jail cells, courtrooms, booking rooms, prison yards and detention centers.

Matthew 25:37-40

Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’



Why does the UCC work to address injustice in our criminal justice system?

Throughout its history, the witness of the United Church of Christ General Synod reflects a faithful and prophetic engagement with our faith calling to address injustice in our criminal justice system. This witness has taken many forms, addressing key dimensions of the justice system, including alternative sentencing, restorative justice practices, race and class bias, excessive bail and inadequate legal representation, abusive prison conditions and practices such as solitary confinement and the growth of the private prison industry.

The socioeconomic context of these policy statements precedes and then documents the process of mass incarceration that has led to an inmate population in excess of 2.3 million people in the United States, with an additional five to six million persons on probation and parole. With just five percent of the world's population, the United States holds nearly 25 percent of the world's prisoners. One in every 32 adults in the United States is under the authority of the criminal justice system – the highest rate of any country in the world. Today there are more African Americans in jail, prison, or under the supervision of the courts than there were enslaved in 1850.

The impact extends beyond the individuals who are incarcerated to their families and communities. Ultimately, we all bear the costs.

Opportunities for change

In a time of sharp partisan division and political gridlock, it is notable that criminal justice reform measures offer one of the few openings for bipartisan cooperation and meaningful change in our public policy. Adding to this momentum, the dialogue and debate about police conduct in the deaths of Michael Brown in St. Louis, Eric Garner in Staten Island and

Tamir Rice in Cleveland, have drawn renewed attention to race and class disparities in police practices and the criminal justice system.

Members of Congress are reaching across the aisles, beyond partisan differences, in the hope of finding a meaningful way forward.

Now is the time

The energy gathering around this important issue is impressive. Faith-based and secular civil rights advocacy organizations including the National Council of Churches, the Samuel Dewitt Proctor Conference and the NAACP have named mass incarceration as a priority for their work. Additionally a number of notable bipartisan coalitions have emerged to address the need for criminal justice reform. Their members include the Center for Public Safety, the ACLU, Americans for Tax Reform, and Freedom Works.

We find ourselves at a pivotal moment in public policy advocacy around criminal justice reform. There is not yet uniform agreement about the causes of mass incarceration and the measures that are needed to restore our broken criminal justice system. There is, however, significant agreement around measures that would address racial bias, including sentencing disparities, racial profiling, the militarization of police forces, and inadequate prevention and reentry programs. Advocates are also addressing the impact of economic, educational, and health care disparities on rates of incarceration.

It has been said that reconciliation begins with God and is worked out on earth – the challenge of restoring *justice* to the criminal justice system is before us. The time for action is now!