

2017 Journal of the Florida Annual Conference – Part III

Abolishing the Systems of Mass Incarceration

BIBLICAL and THEOLOGICAL PREMISE

Woe to you who issue unjust laws, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice, and to rob the poor of my people of their rights. (Isaiah 10:1-2a)

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captive and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free. (Luke 4:18)

WHEREAS, the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church, which represents an annual conference within the connectional body of the United Methodist Church, as well as, Christians professing the teachings of the Prophets and Gospels, we are responsible for speaking and acting prophetically when the laws of the land are not just or fair to all communities they are intended to serve and protect; and

WHEREAS, mass incarceration across the United States has reached levels unprecedented in history, akin to “A New Jim Crow or Slavery by Another Name”, in the words of Michelle Alexander author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. And, it is fiscally unsustainable, totally ineffective and morally indefensible; and

- With 5% of the world's population the United States has 25% of the world's prisoners; from approximately 300,000 in 1970 the number of the incarcerated in prisons and jails has grown to over 2.3 million.
- Incarceration rates in the United States are by far the highest in the world; five to nine times the rates in comparable industrialized democracies (e.g., Great Britain and Germany).
- The vast majority of prisoners are poor and undereducated.
- The large majority of offenders have committed non-violent, drug related crimes (possession of marijuana still accounts for vast majority of most drug arrests).
- There is great racial and ethnic disparity in the application of justice in the United States: more than 60% of the people in prison are racial and ethnic minorities. For Black males in their thirties, 1 in every 10 is in prison or jail on any given day. These trends have been intensified by the disproportionate impact of the "war on drugs," in which two-thirds of all persons in prison for drug offenses are people of color
- Mass incarceration has been making severe strains on state and federal budgets; for example, one-third of the budget of the Department of Justice goes to incarceration.
- “The criminal justice system in America is bizarrely horrible and weirdly tolerated,” according to the founder of the Marshall Project, “the high recidivism rate, approaching 70% in many jurisdictions, is only one indicator that the system is indeed broken.”

WHEREAS, since the 1980s, non-violent drug offenses have led to substantial sentencing of people of all races; however, punishment lodged against African Americans has been extreme. For example, the rate of drug use among White and African Americans is the same, African American men comprise 66% of the people in prison for drug use; and

WHEREAS, African American men are currently more likely to be controlled by the criminal justice system, prosecuted more often, sentenced for longer terms, often prohibited from voting, and disqualified from serving on a jury, all the while continuing to suffer discrimination in employment, housing, and federal assistance; and

WHEREAS, people of color bear the brunt of our “criminal justice” system, no one is exempt from the problems of prosecutorial overreach, a poor public defender system, uneven sentencing, unreasonable parole practices, lack of funding for re-entry programs, and the use of prisons to house people for whom treatment for mental illness is not available; and

WHEREAS, according to the U.S. Department of Justice, the link between academic failure, delinquency, violence, and crime is welded to reading. Reliable data indicates that 85% of juveniles who interface with the court system are functionally illiterate and 70% of inmates in prison cannot read above fourth grade reading level. Inmates who receive no reading help have a 70% chance of returning to prison; this risk reduces to 16% for those who receive such assistance; and

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THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church identifies mass incarceration as a critical human and civil rights issue in the United States because of its disparate impact on and disenfranchisement of people of color, youth, and people with limited economic resources; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church reaffirms its commitment to speak and act prophetically to disrupt and abolish the growing prison industrial complex in the United States; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, to turn this tide of institutionalized racism and economic injustice by mass incarceration in the United States, that the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church, its Social Justice Ministry, and local congregations are encouraged to provide opportunities for education, mobilization, public witness, and advocate for public policies that will advocate against mass incarceration; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church and its constituents stand firmly on the Rights of Racial and Ethnic Groups as they pertain to the statement, *“historical and institutional racism provide support for white privilege, and white people, as a result of the color of their skin, are granted privileges and benefits that are unfairly denied persons of color. We define racial discrimination as the disparate treatment and lack of full access to resources and opportunities in the church and in society based on race or ethnicity. Therefore, we recognize racism as sin and affirm the ultimate and temporal worth of all persons.”* (The Book of Discipline of United Methodist 2012, Social Principles).

FINALLY, BE IT RESOLVED this resolution will have no financial impact on the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church’s budget.

Respectfully submitted,

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Reverend Mary L. Mitchell, CCORR
Reverend Rini Hernandez, District Superintendent
Reverend Sarah Miller, Social Justice Committee
Reverend Clarke-Campbell Evans, Director of the Office of Missional Engagement
Reverend Dr. Sharon Austin, Director of Conference Connectional Ministries
Reverend Dr. Geraldine McClellan, Chairperson of Florida Caucus of BMCR

Respectfully supported by,
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Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass incarceration In the Age of Colorblindness*, The New Press, New York, 2010.
The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2012
Treatment Advocacy Center: TAC.Reports.org/treatment-behind-bars.
U.S. Department of Justice and the National Institute for Literacy.