

Committee 1

DISMANTLING DISCRIMINATORY SYSTEMS OF MASS INCARCERATION IN THE UNITED STATES

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.

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.

WHEREAS, Justice Commission Hearings on Mass Incarceration conducted by the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference found evidence supporting author Michelle Alexander's position that mass incarceration is the "New Jim Crow," creating a system of modern-day enslavement. According to the findings, "it is apparent that the system of mass incarceration in the U.S. is replete with human rights violations by standards of the U.S. Constitution and the United Nations International Standards of Conduct."

WHEREAS, the private prison industry aggressively solicits contracts from federal and state governments to provide facilities for prisoners, and specifically target detention of undocumented immigrants; many of which contracts require a minimum of 90% utilization of jail bed space. Texas leads the nation in the number of private prison beds, and New Mexico outsources the largest percentage of its inmate population to private corporations (43.8%) in the nation. Arizona, which now incarcerates over 13% of its prisoners in private prisons and is known as the national epicenter for incarcerating undocumented immigrants.

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.

WHEREAS, jails and prisons hold more individuals with serious mental illness than the largest remaining state psychiatric hospital in 44 of the 50 states and the District of Columbia. In 2012, there were estimated to be 356,268 inmates with severe mental illness incarcerated, at the same time, there were approximately 35,000 patients with severe mental illness in state psychiatric hospitals proving that the number of mentally ill persons in prisons and jails was ten times the number remaining in state hospitals.

WHEREAS, the growing prison industry is producing a vast underclass of former felons. The situation regarding prisoner reentry is dire. About three-quarters of a million prisoners are being released in the community each year. They face extreme hardship in housing, employment, family reunification, health and mental health care, and general isolation and alienation. They also suffer from debt (required restitution and associated parole and probation fees, fines, and penalties, with little or no income), as well as possible voting and entitlement disenfranchisement.

WHEREAS, estimates indicate that unduplicated expenditures to maintain the prison industrial complex are \$300 billion per year. The burden of such expenditures has led to the increasing privatization of that complex, especially in rural areas with small populations, where there is a need for employment and other commerce, including suppliers of goods and services. As a business, the first priority of private companies is profit; therefore, income for private prisons depends entirely on maintaining a large and stable inmate population. But the demand for guaranteed occupancy rates runs counter to efforts toward early release, alternative sentencing, and other forms of restitution, especially in cases of non-violent crimes.

WHEREAS, private prisons are exempt from some fundamental legal reporting mechanisms, including public reporting of crimes and escapes and the Freedom of Information Act. While confirmed data is hard to find, reliable sources indicate that the largest percentage of persons incarcerated in private prisons are African American men and women.

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.

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the Thirtieth General Synod of the United Church of Christ identifies mass incarceration as a critical human and civil rights issue in the U.S. because of its disparate impact on and disenfranchisement of people of color, youth, people with mental illness, and people with limited economic and other resources; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Thirtieth General Synod of the United Church of Christ reaffirms its commitment to speak and act prophetically to disrupt and dismantle the growing prison industrial complex in the United States by pursuing every public forum available;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, to turn this tide of institutionalized racism and economic injustice by mass incarceration in the United States, that Justice and Witness Ministries, Conferences, and local congregations are encouraged to provide opportunities for education, mobilization, public witness, and public policy, and to engage in a periodic review.

FUNDING

The funding for the implementation of the Resolution will be made in accordance with the overall mandates of the affected agencies and the funds available.

IMPLEMENTATION

The Officers of the Church, in consultation with appropriate ministries and other entities of the United Church of Christ, will determine the implementing body.