The United Church of Christ and Racial Justice

The United Church of Christ (UCC) believes that all people are created in the image of God and that the use of racist imagery is an affront to basic human rights and dignity.

The UCC believes, from a perspective of faith, that people should be rehabilitated by the justice system and have an opportunity to return to society. There is a moral imperative to speak to the issue, as forgiveness, repentance, fairness and justice are all fundamental to the Christian faith. Some citizens are negatively impacted upon completion of their prison sentences when returning to society; in some instances, those persons cannot vote, lose access to veteran’s benefits, and cannot obtain student loans to resume or further their education.

For more than 40 years, the General Synod has affirmed its commitment to improving the criminal justice systems of state and federal governments, motivated by its belief that prisons should be primarily institutions for the training and reform of inmates and vehicles of rehabilitative and restorative justice. The criminal justice system disproportionately affects communities of color and the disenfranchised, and the church is responsible to protect anyone who is unjustly affected:

- There are more African American men under the supervision of the criminal justice system today than there were in the slavery system. (Source: The Caging of America," Adam Gopnik, The New Yorker Magazine, January 30, 2012)
- African American males comprise only 6 percent of the U.S. population, but they make up 40 percent of those in prison or jail. African American males have a 32 percent chance of serving time at some point in their lives, while white males have only a 6 percent chance.
- In the last 10 years, there has been an increase of 219 percent of incarcerated Hispanics; moreover, people with mental health conditions compromise 64 percent of the prison system nationwide.

The UCC led the call for justice for the Wilmington 10, the group of nine black men and one white woman wrongly imprisoned in 1972 for a crime they didn't commit. Denominational leaders said the case was a galvanizing moment for racial justice, and all 10 were released, and, finally in 2013, given full pardons. (http://www.ucc.org/ucc-celebrates-pardons-of)
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The church identifies the coming years as a key time to call for legislative change. There is bipartisan consensus in Congress, and support from the American public, that the prison system fails to meet its goal of rehabilitating incarcerated people. UCC justice advocates have engaged with ecumenical partners to develop an advocacy strategy to address government leaders in calling for criminal justice reform. (http://www.ucc.org/news_mass_incarceration_conference_04132015) The church’s media ministry successfully advocated for legislative protection of prisoners from phone companies with a camp on collect calls. This change protects families, pastors, community members and others from expensive phone bills for calls to people in prison, jails or detention centers. (http://www.ucc.org/prison-phone-rates-02112014)

The UCC has a long history of confronting all types of discrimination and condemning the use of Native American imagery for sports team mascots, names and logos. In 1991, the General Synod of the UCC passed a resolution calling upon its members to work for the elimination of negative stereotyping of Native Americans and the use of Native American imagery for sports team mascots, names and logos.

The church for the past 20 years, the UCC has been a vocal opponent of the Major League Baseball team, the Cleveland Indians, and its Chief Wahoo logo, protesting the name and image and Opening Day events.