

97-GS-54 VOTED: The Twenty-first General Synod adopts the Resolution "Prison Industrial Complex."

RESOLUTION "PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX"

WHEREAS, we read in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new," and in Hebrews 13:3 "remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured;"

WHEREAS, the U.S. now has 5 million people in the criminal justice system, including over 1.5 million in federal, state, and local prisons and jails and 3.5 million on probation or parole;

WHEREAS, the U.S. has the highest rate of incarceration in the world and the number of people in the U.S. in the criminal justice system will soon surpass the number in higher education;

WHEREAS, African Americans, Latinos and Latinas, and indigenous peoples are disproportionately incarcerated;

WHEREAS, by the year 2010, the majority of all African American men will have been in the criminal justice system at one time in their life if present trends continue;

WHEREAS, the number of incarcerated women has nearly tripled since 1980 and 1.5 million children in the U.S. are now separated from their mothers, although 60 percent of these women were convicted of non-violent crimes;

WHEREAS, spending on prisons and security now approaches our spending on national defense, although serious and violent crimes have dropped for five straight years in a row;

WHEREAS, the Eleventh General Synod called for a moratorium on the construction of new prisons and jails;

WHEREAS, our nation's prison industrial complex now includes operation of prisons by private companies and Wall Street investment houses compete to underwrite private tax-exempt bonds while small rural communities increasingly look to the prison industry to replace lost farm-related and unskilled blue-collar jobs;

WHEREAS, present economic disparities continue to widen the gap between the rich and the poor in our society, creating a climate in which violent crime and drug addiction flourish;

WHEREAS, mounting evidence demonstrates that there is significant economic and racial bias in surveillance, arrests, convictions, and sentencing;

WHEREAS, the majority of those incarcerated in the last fifteen years are serving time for drug-related offenses;

WHEREAS, the present prison system focuses on punishment and degradation rather than on "correction" or rehabilitation, as evident in the re-establishment of chain gangs and diminished educational, social, and training opportunities for prisoners; and

WHEREAS, the church must enable people to recognize that the violence of prison life promotes violence rather than public safety;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Twenty-first General Synod of the United Church of Christ expresses its opposition to the growth in the prison population and the rapid construction of prisons. It calls upon churches, associations, conferences, and the national setting of the United Church of Christ to become more conscious of, and prophetically responsive to, the growing prison industrial complex in the United States;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Twenty-first General Synod requests the Commission for Racial Justice, Office for Church in Society and the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries to create a task group which monitors and reflects on the scope of the issues involved and:

1. recommends methods of involvement for local congregations in issues related to prisons;
2. enables local churches and conferences to:
  - a) develop a theology of transformation based on justice, rehabilitation, and empowerment;
  - b) raise the church's consciousness of the social, racial, and economic inequities which engender crime and violence; and
  - c) monitor state criminal justice and sentencing laws; advocate caps on prison populations; advocate a moratorium on construction; and promote budget policies devoted to rehabilitation, education, and empowerment rather than punishment;
3. provides a clearinghouse for prison related initiatives in and for local congregations; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Twenty-first General Synod calls on local churches to:

1. be open and supportive of prisoners' families including welcoming them into membership and fellowship in our churches;
2. encourage and support volunteers who offer services both to prisoners and their families and to victims of crime and their families;
3. develop, support, and participate in community drug prevention and treatment programs;
4. learn and advocate alternative sentencing and restitution programs which are beneficial and restorative to victims, offenders, and communities;
5. provide trained leaders who can mediate conflicts and advocate for alternative sentencing and restitution;
6. talk with prison chaplains to discern ways local congregations might become actively involved in prison ministries;
7. become resources for helping those recently released from prison to re-enter the community;
8. enable interested people to become court observers and to offer legal services to those accused of crime; and
9. celebrate and share the stories of local congregations who are doing these ministries already.

Subject to the availability of funds.