

Christian Churches Together

Principles on Mass Incarceration

Introduction

In February 2014, at its Annual Convocation, Christian Churches Together (CCT) issued a press release on Mass Incarceration. After several days of informative presentations by numerous experts and of lively discussions, the members of the most diverse Christian fellowship in the USA achieved a consensus on this important issue. This press release (*link at end*) identifies the great problems with the current situation.

At the time of the February meeting the member churches and organizations also agreed that a **Statement of Principles on Mass Incarceration** should be available to members of CCT and to the public at large. These would not only summarize the learnings gleaned at the Annual Meeting but would provide benchmarks for future efforts.

Representatives of the five families of CCT met during the summer of 2014 and drafted the document. CCT Steering Committee approved the principles on September 2014. The following principles are offered as recommendations to guide CCT participants their efforts to encourage our government (state and federal) to implement reforms on criminal justice. CCT encourage the churches to further study of mass incarceration practices nationally and of incarceration in states and local communities as well.

CCT Principles on Mass Incarceration

- 1. We begin by noting that all of us have a shared humanity.** This is the crucial point for how we treat others. Prisoners and all those involved in the penal system should be given the respect due to human brothers and sisters.
- 2. Christians believe that all people are created in the image and likeness of God.** Thus each person is of inestimable worth—even when the likeness of God is marred in a person’s life and distracts others from seeing the image of the divine. God loves each and every person. God calls each Christian to love every neighbor, including those in prison and those family members, especially children, and others affected by incarceration. [See Genesis 1:26]
- 3. We need to acknowledge and confront the reality that prisoners most likely are from poor families and of African American and Hispanic Heritage.** African Americans are particularly likely to be incarcerated as Hispanics are most likely to be in detention. The number of incarcerated poor women has been growing. The centuries-long history of racism in America is a fact that has to be dealt with and not denied. What some call the ‘Original Sin’ of America continues to be with us. The churches are called to stand together to challenge the systemic racism manifested in the justice system. [See John 13: 34-35]

4. Mass incarceration does not synergize with the Christian principle of Love of Neighbor. All Christian Churches must unite in one voice to denounce the failed practice of mass incarceration and promote compassionate action to address the core issues of poverty and hopelessness in our poorest communities. CCT continues to encourage its member denominations and organizations to increase awareness, educate, and take action in the public square and in the political process—both locally and nationally-- to oppose mass incarceration.

5. As Christians, we believe the purpose of Incarceration must be for the safety of the community and the restoration of violent offenders. There is a need for systemic change so as to deal appropriately with those who could harm others while offering fair sentences and opportunities for healing and learning to those who are non-violent.

6. Churches collaborating across denominational lines make for a stronger voice on issues of mass incarceration whether local, state or national. The basic principles of CCT call for working together as much as possible and seeking consensus whenever possible.

There is a consensus that treatment for addiction and assistance with other personal problems is a better investment of community resources than long-term sentences.

There is a consensus that for-profit prison corporations are not only an obstacle to reform but also that there is a basic conflict between the search for profit and the ultimate goal of rehabilitation.

7. Local churches can offer a great deal to their sisters and brothers. Church members have gifts that can be shared to help with the healing and restoration of people who may be broken and are usually ashamed. The best time for intervention is the time the offense is first known. Church members by their presence and affirmation are critical to the healing process. Positive relationships heal. [See Galatians 6:1-10]

8. There are further dimensions to the healing process. Family relationships and other relationships have often been stressed or injured by incarceration. Healing and reconciliation have many dimensions and can last over considerable time. The church community's presence before, during and after can be vital to this process.

9. An ultimate goal, not easily attained, would be for reconciliation with the victim(s). Members of the community with knowledge of healing processes can be very helpful in assisting in this difficult healing process. [See Luke 6: 27-36]

10. Mass incarceration must stop. Mass incarceration has not produced the correction of errants, healing of addicts, restoration of families, nor increased our national wellbeing. We are challenging ourselves together with government and the nation to seize this moment when multiple forces are aligning toward positive actions to correct the injustices within our 'justice' system.

Christian Churches Together in the USA
For information on CCT visit, www.cctusa.net

Link to press release:
<http://christianchurchestogether.org/2014-mass-incarceration-press-release/>)

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