

Report of the Commission on Christian Action

The Commission on Christian Action has focused on following up on the recommendations of the 2015 report to the General Synod, completing a joint paper with the Commission on Theology, and discussion of two social concerns brought to the attention of the commissioners just prior to General Synod 2015.

Referral of Overture on Reorientation/Reparative Therapy

R-14 was referred to the Commission on Christian Action (CCA) by the 2015 General Synod. R-14 states, "To declare that the RCA does not support the use of reorientation/reparative therapy" (*MGS 2015*, p. 88). This recommendation was in response to Overture 4 from the Classis of New Brunswick.

The CCA was asked to take a look at reorientation/reparative therapy and provide guidance on whether to make such a declaration. A discussion among the commissioners about the use of reorientation/reparative therapy led us to know that it was only in seeking the guidance and wisdom of the Lord through prayer, discernment, and research of the issue that we could arrive at a recommendation to the church.

Reorientation/reparative therapy is treatment aimed at changing the sexual orientation of homosexual men and women and is defined as psychotherapy or other interventions aimed at eliminating homosexual desires. "Reparative therapy" has been rejected by mental health, medical, and scientific organizations. These therapies are conducted in various settings including private offices, inpatient units, residential facilities, and boarding schools. The treatments may include individual and group therapy; behavior therapies involving electrical shocks to the hands, torso, and genitals while exposing the client to homoerotic images; covert sensitization, which involves imagining erotic circumstances and pairing this with something frightening or revolting or administering emetics; performing exorcism; subjecting the individual to isolation and restraints; and engaging in other therapies designed to modify gender behavior to be more hetero-congruent (sports training and coaching for males and cosmetics application for females).¹

Aside from the ethical principles of autonomy, justice, and beneficence that these practices violate, these therapies have questionable outcomes regarding effectiveness in actually changing a person's sexual orientation. In fact "reparative" or "conversion" therapies have not supported authentic change in sexual orientation itself. In cases where homosexual behavior changed to heterosexual behavior, the behavioral changes were short-lived. Sexual orientation itself was not changed because the complex set of attractions and feelings that constitute sexual orientation had not changed.²

The history of conversion therapy dates back to Sigmund Freud, who stated that homosexuality could sometimes be removed through hypnotic suggestion.³ Freud wrote that changing homosexuality was difficult and possible only under unusually favorable conditions, observing that "in general to undertake to convert a fully developed homosexual into a heterosexual does not offer much more prospect of success than the reverse."⁴ Success meant making heterosexual feeling possible, not eliminating homosexual feelings.⁵ During the three decades between Freud's death in 1939 and the Stonewall riots in 1969, conversion therapy received approval from most of the psychiatric establishment in the United States.⁶

In the 1960s many mental health professionals, clergy, and politicians supported the idea that homosexuality was a mental health disorder that could be cured through some combination of prayer and therapy which included electroshock therapy, masturbatory reconditioning, and giving patients nausea-inducing drugs while forcing them to view homosexual erotica.

The Stonewall riots were a series of spontaneous, violent demonstrations by members of the gay community against police raids that took place in the early morning hours of June 28, 1969, at the Stonewall Inn, located in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of Manhattan, New York City.⁷ They are widely considered to constitute the single most important event leading to the gay liberation movement and the modern fight for LGBT rights in the United States.⁸

The social transformation of society in the 1970s was the impetus for the American Psychiatric Association voting to remove homosexuality from its list of mental health disorders.

The 1990s witnessed a resurgence of “ex-gay” therapy. Joseph Nicolosi played a significant role in the development of conversion therapy with his first published work in 1991, *Reparative Therapy of Male Homosexuality*.⁹ The term “reparative” refers to Nicolosi’s hypothesis that same-sex attraction is a person’s rational and unconscious attempt to “self-repair” feelings of inferiority.^{10,11} In 1992, Nicolosi, with Charles Socarides and Benjamin Kaufman, founded the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH), an organization that opposes the mainstream medical view of homosexuality and aims to “make effective psychological therapy available to all homosexual men and women who seek change.”¹² Nicolosi’s website states:

For many years, I have been assisting men and women—mostly, persons who are still at a crossroads about their sexual identity—to reduce their same-sex attractions and explore their heterosexual potential. I am a licensed clinical psychologist who shares your vision of humanity. I believe that our bodies tell us who we are, and that our bodies have made us for heterosexuality. Perhaps you experience same-sex attractions, but you believe you were not destined to be gay. You believe that these feelings do not represent “who you really are.” If this is your belief, then we may be able to help you. I have helped many men reduce their unwanted same-sex attractions, so that they lose their compelling, life-disrupting power, and assisted them in exploring and developing their heterosexual potential.¹³

In the late 1990s, Christian rights groups such as the Family Research Council, a conservative Christian group and lobbying organization that promotes what it considers to be traditional family values and lobbies for socially conservative policies, and the American Family Association, a nonprofit organization promoting fundamentalist Christian values, spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in advertising and promoting conversion therapy.¹⁴ [The ex-gay movement was founded in 1973 when Love in Action became the first contemporary ex-gay ministry. Such ministries](#) as Exodus International, Love in Action, JONAH (Jews Offering New Alternatives to Homosexuality), Courage International for Catholics, North Star for the LDS Church, and Joel 2:25 International for Catholic and Protestant Christians proliferated. Love in Action, Exodus International, and JONAH have since ceased operation.

Exodus International director Alan Chambers resigned in 2013 and has since denounced the practice of reparative therapy, apologizing to those who had been harmed by the methods of Exodus. In his resignation, he made the following statement:

I am sorry for the pain and hurt many of you have experienced. I am sorry that some of you spent years working through the shame and guilt you felt when your attractions didn't change. I am sorry we promoted sexual orientation change efforts and reparative theories about sexual orientation that stigmatized parents.¹⁵

In October 2015, Albert Mohler, a Southern Baptist theologian, spoke out against “the use of psychological counseling aimed at turning gay people straight.”¹⁶

Love in Action has changed its name and focus to a Christian discipleship ministry that exists to restore those trapped in sexual and relational sin. On June 25, 2015, in the first-ever trial of conversion therapy in the United States, a New Jersey jury found JONAH guilty of consumer fraud for promising to be able to change its clients' sexual urges and determined its commercial practices to be unconscionable. Conversion therapy is now outlawed in California, Oregon, New Jersey, and the District of Columbia.

In 2000, the American Psychiatric Association made the following position statement on therapies focused on change of sexual orientation:

Psychotherapeutic modalities to convert or “repair” homosexuality are based on developmental theories whose scientific validity is questionable. Furthermore, anecdotal reports of “cures” are counterbalanced by anecdotal claims of psychological harm. In the last four decades, “reparative” therapists have not produced any rigorous scientific research to substantiate their claims of cure. Until there is such research available, the American Psychiatric Association recommends that ethical practitioners refrain from attempts to change individuals' sexual orientation, keeping in mind the medical dictum to first, do no harm.

The potential risks of reparative therapy are great, including depression, anxiety and self-destructive behavior, since therapist alignment with societal prejudices against homosexuality may reinforce self-hatred already experienced by the patient. Many patients who have undergone reparative therapy relate that they were inaccurately told that homosexuals are lonely, unhappy individuals who never achieve acceptance or satisfaction. The possibility that the person might achieve happiness and satisfying interpersonal relationships as a gay man or lesbian is not presented, nor are alternative approaches to dealing with the effects of societal stigmatization discussed.¹⁷

Additionally, fifteen other national psychological, educational, counseling, and social work associations made similar statements denouncing reorientation/reparative therapy.

There has been no data found for the widespread and long-term effectiveness of reparative therapy. However, there is documentation of the adverse effects of reparative therapy. Three states and the District of Columbia have outlawed the practice of reorientation/reparative therapy. As a denomination that stands on biblical principles, any approach to minister to our brothers and sisters attracted to members of the same sex must be sensitive, caring, filled with grace, and in line with biblical teaching.

Therefore, the Commission on Christian Action recommends:

R 16-22

To direct the General Synod Council to remove all statements on the website supporting the use of reorientation/reparative therapy and

to declare that the RCA does not support the use of reorientation/reparative therapy.

Mass Incarceration Coalition

The coalition studying mass incarceration was asked to submit a report to General Synod for the next three years.

The mass incarceration coalition agreed that efforts need to be focused at the local church and classis levels. The following is a summary of the coalition's work over the past year.

1. The coalition contacted each of the regional synods to request information on classes and churches in order to connect ministers and churches whose ministry focus is supporting those who are incarcerated, their families, victims of violence and crime, and reentry for prisoners. We hope to form a learning community around this important work. Lindsay Bona is developing a database of information in order to connect people around the country.
2. Members of the coalition attended a webinar put on by the National Council of Churches on the issue of mass incarceration.
3. Work continues through the coalition and the Commission on Christian Action on a strategic plan for bringing the issue of mass incarceration to the RCA.
4. The coalition recommends reading the book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander as a seminal work related to the issue of mass incarceration.

The coalition offers the following recommendation:

R 16-23

To direct the General Synod Council to host a meeting of people interested in the study and work of mass incarceration as the beginning of a learning community.

To decrease cost, this meeting could take place during the October meeting of commissions and the General Synod Council.

Webpage for Mass Incarceration Resources

R-36 (2015) directed the creation of a webpage for resources related to mass incarceration. The webpage has been created (www.rca.org/resources/advocacy/resources-related-mass-incarceration) and resources have been added. Additional information for the page will consist of:

- A directory of RCA churches involved in ministries around mass incarceration
- Worship resources related to mass incarceration, one of which will be the CCA and Commission on Theology exhortation on the church and criminal justice introduced later in this report
- CCA papers on the issue of mass incarceration
- Additional links to educational resources

Populating the webpage will be an ongoing process. RCA members with pertinent information they want to have posted to the page are encouraged to submit such information to the CCA through its moderator, Patricia Sealy (patsealy@verizon.net).

Joint Paper on Mass Incarceration

The 2014 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America received a paper from the Commission on Christian Action titled “Mass Incarceration in the United States.” The paper named mass incarceration as a critical social issue of our time. Citing statistics, the paper said that mass incarceration will have significant and long-lasting impact both on American society and, more particularly, on communities of color.

For a more complete account of mass incarceration in our time, delegates are encouraged to read the original 2014 paper (images.rca.org/docs/mgs/2014MGS-ChristianAction.pdf). For a thumbnail sketch of its realities, however, here are some statistics and facts:

- Although the U.S. has just 5 percent of the global population, it has 25 percent of the world’s incarcerated people.
- The prison population in the U.S. is racially disproportionate. African Americans make up 39.4 percent of the prison population, but only 13.6 percent of the general population. Together, African Americans and Hispanics make up 59.4 percent of all prisoners, even though these groups only make up approximately 25 percent of the population.
- One in every 28 children in the United States has an incarcerated parent. In terms of race, one in nine African American children, one in 28 Hispanic children, and one in 57 white children have an incarcerated parent.
- State spending on corrections reached \$52.4 billion in fiscal year 2012. Estimates are that the state and federal governments combined spent \$80 billion on corrections in 2010.
- Privatized prisons have become both a major enterprise and source of political spending, thus setting into action a vested interest in this growing problem.
- The War on Drugs campaign is responsible for the majority of incarcerations of non-violent offenders. Current drug policies have led to an overburdened and over-saturated incarceration system that disproportionately affects minorities. Mandatory sentencing laws enacted in the mid-1980s have also substantially increased incarceration rates.
- Children of incarcerated parents are invisible victims or collateral damage because of disruption to their homes, educations, and economic support, or even movement into the foster care system.

In response to the 2014 Commission on Christian Action paper “Mass Incarceration in the United States,” the General Synod directed the Commission on Christian Action, in consultation with the Commission on Theology, “to develop a paper on God, justice, and compassion for those who are incarcerated, victims of incarceration, families of the incarcerated, and returned citizens that addresses the church’s role in being the beloved community of God” (*MGS 2014*, R-45, p. 193). In response to R-45, the Commission on Christian Action, in consultation with the Commission on Theology, has written the following exhortation.

In this brief paper, we offer a theological response to the critical social issue of mass incarceration in the form of lamentations and affirmations that may help us live more deeply into the church’s role in being the beloved community of God. These are things we can lament and affirm together with and on behalf of those who are incarcerated, victims of incarceration,

families of the incarcerated, and returned citizens, as well as those who work in the prison system and those who are working to address injustices.

To be clear, we are not offering a new confession of the church, but our hope in offering a response to R-45 in this format is that individual churches and our denomination as a whole might find a biblical and theological entry point toward further discussion, action, and healing within this most critical social issue of our time.

THE CHURCH AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE: A BRIEF EXHORTATION

In the spirit of the Psalms, these things we lament:

- **We lament the cries of suffering and despair rising from the criminal justice system—from victims in and outside of prison, from the incarcerated, their families and communities, the wrongly convicted, returned citizens, and those who work in the system.**

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:22-23).

- **We lament the social harm incarceration causes.**

“We have become orphans, fatherless; our mothers are like widows” (Lamentations 5:3).

- **We lament injustices that remain unnoticed and unaddressed.**

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2).

- **We lament the overuse of incarceration; we lament punishment as revenge or retaliation.**

“Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees,
who write oppressive statutes,
to turn aside the needy from justice
and to rob the poor of my people of their right,
that widows may be your spoil,
and that you may make the orphans your prey!” (Isaiah 10:1-2).

- **We lament the evils of racism and the harm it perpetuates in individuals, in communities, and in systems of power. We lament that racism infects the whole system of criminal justice in our time. We lament the inequities that result in an unequal meting out of justice and incarceration.**

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

“In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!” (Colossians 3:11).

“But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors” (James 2:9).

- **We lament incarceration as a profit-making industry.**

“A false balance is an abomination to the LORD, but an accurate weight is his delight” (Proverbs 11:1).

- **We lament the spirit of fear that can inform our view of enemies, strangers, and policy-making with regard to crime.**

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:18-19).

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:43-45).

- **We lament any imagination that informs our view of the accused as “other” or the guilty as evil people, and we recall that we are a people marked by the cross and a savior who was himself viewed as a criminal.**

“When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ She said, ‘No one, sir.’ And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again’” (John 8:9-11).

- **We lament that the reentry process into society for returning citizens is an oppressive process leading to stigmatization; to difficulty finding employment and housing; and to poverty, marginalization, and recidivism.**

“Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right...” (Isaiah 10:1-2).

- **We lament the lack of the Reformed Church in America’s awareness and involvement in this critical issue of our time.**

“Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but do not see, who have ears, but do not hear” (Jeremiah 5:21).

These things we affirm:

- **We affirm the biblical witness to God’s rich vision of love and justice for all humanity.**

“...For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more” (Isaiah 2:3-4).

- **We affirm that there is nothing we can do to place ourselves out of God’s providence.**

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

- **We affirm that Jesus himself was in the prison system.**

“...I was in prison and you visited me” (Matthew 25:36).

- **We affirm the mark of the cross on our lives, where Jesus himself was treated as a criminal, and we affirm his charge to tend to the cries of the most vulnerable among us.**

“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40).

- **We recognize the need for a criminal justice system, even as we affirm the need to strive for a system that is humane, fair, and appropriately limited.**

“For the one in authority is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer” (Romans 13:4, NIV).

- **We affirm that as Christians our entire outlook on life and our role in being the beloved community of God—including issues of justice and incarceration—is one shaped by the prodigal grace and mercy of God in Jesus and the recognition of our own sinfulness and proclivity to do evil.**

“Remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ... So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Ephesians 2:12, 17-18).

- **We affirm that we are called upon to remember and pray for those in prison. We affirm the work of individuals, congregations, and organizations ministering to, for, and with prisoners, families of prisoners, and returning citizens.**

“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” (Hebrews 13:3).

- **We affirm the invitation of Scripture to identify with the incarcerated like Joseph, Jeremiah, John the Baptizer, Peter, Paul—and Christ himself. We affirm the gift of persons such as Guido de Bres, A.J. Muste, Corrie ten Boom, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr., and countless other followers of Christ who have been imprisoned.**

We affirm and proclaim the good news of Christ:

“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 captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’” (Luke 4:18-21).

Prayer

Lord Jesus, for our sake you were condemned as a criminal: Visit our jails and prisons with your pity and judgment. Remember all prisoners; bring the guilty to repentance and amendment of life according to your will, and give them hope for their future. When any are held unjustly, bring them release; forgive us, and teach us to improve our justice. Remember those who work in these institutions; keep them humane and compassionate, and save them from becoming brutal or callous. And since what we do for those in prison, O Lord, we do for you, constrain us to improve their lot. All this we ask for your mercy’s sake. Amen (From the *Book of Common Prayer*).

Finally, we affirm the good work of those in the Reformed Church in America who are already working in various ways within the current prison system and with those affected by it, as well as those working to rectify current injustices. We invite the Reformed Church in America to join together in this work, to continue confessing in word and deed the role of the church in being the beloved community of God, and in praying for a day when justice will “roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). *For we affirm in Christ that the final work of God is ultimately toward restoration, reconciliation, and healing.*

“I have seen their ways, but I will heal them;
I will lead them and repay them with comfort,
creating for their mourners the fruit of the lips” (Isaiah 57:18).

“See, I am making all things new” (Revelation 21:5).

To encourage the church to use the document “The Church and Criminal Justice: A Brief Exhortation” as a liturgical resource, and further;

To direct the General Synod Council to make the document available to the church.

Other Work

The Commission on Christian Action was asked to assign a member to the task force studying diaconal assemblies and willingly complied with the request.

In 2015 the issue of drone warfare was brought to the attention of the commission. A commissioner attended and gave a report on the conference of the Interfaith Network on Drone Warfare and the interfaith statement that was sent to President Barack Obama in May 2015.

Several troubling aspects of militarized drones were presented to the commission:

- The unreported nature of the weapons and their activity, since they are under the CIA and special operations units, leading to a high level of secrecy
- The high levels of civilian casualties, most of which go unreported
- Post-traumatic stress experienced by the operators of drones
- Assassinations of targeted and non-targeted persons
- The possibility of breaking international law

The Interfaith Network on Drone Warfare is comprised of national, regional, and local denominational and faith group headquarters; denominational advocacy offices in Washington, DC; national ecumenical and interfaith organizations; regional judicatories; state ecumenical and interfaith agencies; local congregations; ecumenical and interfaith bodies; and campus ministries. The network has compiled a list of national, regional, and local strategies to work on the issue of lethal drones and targeted killings. The Commission on Christian Action will review and discuss the work of the network during our next meeting in October to determine how to direct the church in this matter.

Additionally in 2015, the commission was apprised of the issue of socially responsible investing. The commission met with RCA minister John Paarlberg of Albany, New York, to gain a clearer understanding of the issue. Following that meeting a decision was made to pursue the issue and contact staff regarding adding the language of screening to the RCA's investment portfolio, particularly as it relates to for-profit prisons. This discussion led us to the recommendation the commission made in 2014 “to direct the General Synod Council to examine RCA investments to ascertain whether the RCA has any investments in private prison corporations and to divest of any such holdings as soon as possible” (*MGS 2014*, R-42, pp. 192-193. R-42 was divided into two parts, R-43 and R-44. R-43 was adopted [“To direct the General Synod Council to examine RCA investments to ascertain whether the RCA has any investments in private prison corporations.”], and R-44 was referred to the GSC [“To divest of any investments in private prison corporations as soon as possible.”]).

RCA investments were examined, and it was determined that the RCA holds no investments in private prison corporations.

R 16-25

To direct the General Synod Council to add screening language to the RCA's investment policies, particularly as it relates to for-profit prisons.

As we continue this work of the Commission on Christian Action, we are ever mindful of the need to hold close to Scripture, seek the will of the Lord, and pray without ceasing. We are humbled that the majestic God we serve has called us to love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly before our God.

Endnotes

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- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ Carter, David. *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004).
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- ¹⁷ American Psychiatric Association. "Position Statement on Therapies Focused on Attempts to Change Sexual Orientation (Reparative or Conversion Therapies)," May 2000.