

**GA-1323**  
**(Item for Reflection and Research)**  
**INCARCERATION, JUSTICE AND RESTORATION IN THE UNITED STATES**

**Accepted by the General Assembly**

Proposal for Reflection and Research:

That the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada, meeting July 13-17, 2013, in Orlando, Florida, accept "In Pursuit of Liberty and Justice for All" as an item for Reflection and Research during the 2013-2015 biennium. This reflection and research process would be accountable by report to the Administrative Committee, the General Board and the 2015 General Assembly.

This process would encourage the church to engage in reflection, prayer and education around the explosive increase in the US prison population over the past 36+ years. This is shown to be due in large part to the federal government's "War on Drugs",<sup>1</sup> and how that has negatively impacted our most disadvantaged populations. According to section 2.4 of the Special Rules of Procedure for the General Assembly, the Administrative Committee would work with the submitters of this item in developing ways for members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to:

- 1) Engage in a study about the cost that the War on Drugs has imposed on poor communities
- 2) Learn of ways to bring about awareness and relief in their communities;
- 3) Explore avenues whereby Disciples may support restoration of full citizenship rights for first-time non-violent drug offenders including the right to vote, serve on a jury and full access to government services such as financial aid for education, housing and employment assistance.

Background

It has been shown<sup>2</sup> that the US prison population in America has exploded between 1980 and 2006 from 350,000 to 2.3 million reflecting changes in laws and policies rather than an increase in crime rates. These changes have included:

- Convictions for non-violent and minor crimes, particularly the possession of drugs rather than their sale, which explain most of the increase in prison population over this 25 year period;
- Long sentences mandated by the "War on Drugs"<sup>3</sup> and various three strike laws;
- Substantial financial incentives for law enforcement departments to prioritize drug arrests, ensuring the dramatic growth in drug prosecutions through federal funding and forfeiture laws;
- Law enforcement interdiction efforts have focused overwhelmingly on poor and disadvantaged communities despite repeated studies that demonstrate that the rate of drug use among affluent communities nationally is similar to or slightly higher.

According to a 2010 study by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences<sup>4</sup>:

- The United States penal population has grown every year for the past thirty-six years;
- The rate of imprisonment in the United States is now four times its historic average and seven times higher than in Western Europe;
- Even more striking than the overall level of incarceration is the concentrated force of the penal system on the most disadvantaged segments of the population;
- One-third of African American male high school dropouts under age 40 are currently behind bars;
- Among all African American men born since the mid-1960s, more than 20 percent will go to prison, nearly twice the number that will graduate college;
- This extraordinary pattern of penal confinement has been called “mass incarceration,” a rate of incarceration so high that it affects not only the individual offender, but also whole social groups.

While media and many public officials continue to inaccurately portray illegal drug use and drug crime as primarily a black and brown issue, enforcement of federal drug laws perpetuate that view by imposing penalties for crack possession which are more severe than those for cocaine possession. This inequity marginalizes a significant number of blacks and Hispanics, keeping many under control of the criminal justice system for life and leading to comparisons to the containment of the black community under Jim Crow laws<sup>5</sup>. It can result in the inability of an ex-felon to find a job, avail themselves of public housing or education and preclude them from voting, sometimes for the rest of their lives.<sup>6</sup>

For these reasons we call for the Administrative Committee (1) to explore ways for the church to engage in reflection and research regarding incarceration, justice and restoration, and (2) to educate members on how to advocate on behalf of nonviolent, first-time drug offenders for the restoration of their access to public assistance programs, education and their right to vote.

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National Convocation

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<sup>1</sup> Drug Primer 2012 - [http://www.uscc.gov/Legal/Primers/Primer\\_Drug.pdf](http://www.uscc.gov/Legal/Primers/Primer_Drug.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness by Michelle Alexander 2010. Library of Congress Index ISBN 978-1-59558-10307. Available for sale online at <http://www.amazon.com/The-New-Crow-Incarceration-Colorblindness/dp/1595581030> . Review online at <http://www.newjimcrow.com/reviews.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Drug Primer 2012 - [http://www.uscc.gov/Legal/Primers/Primer\\_Drug.pdf](http://www.uscc.gov/Legal/Primers/Primer_Drug.pdf)

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<sup>4</sup> The American Academy of Arts and Sciences Daedalus Study in 2010. Complete transcript of study published online at [http://www.amacad.org/news/incarceration\\_crime\\_us\\_prison\\_jail\\_daedalus\\_rehabilitation\\_increase.pdf](http://www.amacad.org/news/incarceration_crime_us_prison_jail_daedalus_rehabilitation_increase.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Jim Crow Laws online at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/>

<sup>6</sup> National Conference of State Legislatures online at <http://www.ncsl.org/issues-research.aspx?tabs=951.62.94>