



Research Report: Policy Advocacy on Criminal Justice

“I was in prison, and you came to me”: A Ministry of Presence

The Episcopal Church has long heeded the Biblical injunction to care for the imprisoned. Initial ministries were local and personal, focused on bringing comfort to prisoners, praying with them and ensuring that they had Bibles and Prayer Books. Prison chaplains provided spiritual instruction and solace at state and local penitentiaries, but the General Convention had not yet established a church-wide policy of direct advocacy for criminal justice reform. The Church’s mission to the incarcerated, particularly in the nineteenth century, was often carried out locally by well organized [women’s groups](#) and by City Missions, which pooled parish and diocesan resources to work effectively on complex issues of public importance. In 1934, in New York City alone, the [City Mission](#) maintained 18 prison chaplaincies, and similar efforts were undertaken in America’s other major cities.

With the growing awareness of the dehumanizing effects of imprisonment and the recognition of the often disproportionate incarceration of the poor and minorities, the Church has greatly expanded the scope of its prison ministry, which continues to include visitation but now seeks to transform the penal system at its roots. Locally, such groups as Episcopal Prison Ministries partners with ecumenical groups and government organizations to create programs emphasizing reconciliation, forgiveness, and reformation. Since 1988, The Episcopal Church has supported the coordination of work among prison chaplains through its office of the [Bishop Suffragan for Armed Forces and Federal Ministries](#).

Public Policy Advocacy

General Convention’s 1910 creation of the [Social Service Commission](#) marks the beginning of the Church’s policy advocacy on behalf of the incarcerated, work which had already been undertaken by the dioceses for some time. The Commission endorsed prevention and rehabilitation rather than punishment of prisoners, and saw the issue of incarceration as linked to the growing poverty and inequities of urban society. General Convention in 1916 voted to address the National Committee on Prisons with its endorsement of humane and [Christian treatment of inmates](#).

It became especially apparent in the period of the 1970s and 1980s that the “war on drugs,” regressive tax reform, and for-profit prison industry was feeding a dramatic growth in prison populations. Incarceration was overwhelmingly applied to the poor and minority populations, and prison conditions were worsening. The Episcopal Church began in earnest to demand change in stronger terms. The 1969 General Convention [deplored the “inhuman conditions](#) which prevail in our prisons today,” and charged the Church to “use all available resources of influence and manpower to bring about drastic revision and reform of Federal, state and local penal systems.” Executive Council endorsed this two years later, calling in addition for improved access to chaplains of all faiths, better medical attention, and [an end to depersonalization](#) of imprisoned people.

The Church has repeated these calls for prison reform faithfully, adapting them to counter new forms of unjust treatment of the incarcerated and their affected families. In the past two decades General Convention has demanded a moratorium on [construction](#) and [use of private prisons](#), a repeal of [mandatory](#) federal [sentencing guidelines](#), and [access to DNA testing](#) for all accused persons. The

General Convention has asked Episcopalians to advocate for sweeping policy changes to address the racial and economic inequities in the justice system, including alternatives to incarceration for the addicted and mentally ill and protection for the [rights of the disabled](#).

Implementing these requests, Church members have sought to transform what one attendee of the first National Episcopal Prison Ministry Conference aptly called the “[climate of revenge](#),” and to recognize that “every human being is capable of rehabilitation and change.” General Convention has promoted a more [holistic understanding](#) of the cycles of violence, addiction and poverty which lead to repeat offenses, and which can affect not only prisoners but their families, who often find themselves outcasts and without support.

The harmful effects of mass incarceration as a means of control over the lives of the poor has been recognized as an assault on the families of minorities in particular. The Church has established [summer camps](#) for the [children of inmates](#), and has sought to end the “[school to prison pipeline](#),” whereby children in some communities view incarceration not only as inevitable but as a rite of passage. General Convention has advocated for [vocational programs and educational opportunities](#) for offenders, and supports programs to help released inmates [reintegrate into society](#). Restoring to productive society those who have been discarded and left behind by unjust mass incarceration has become a top priority in the Church’s advocacy for achieving social reconciliation and God’s Beloved Community as embraced by [General Convention](#) and [Executive Council](#) in 2015.

The 2015 General Convention specifically named the goal of eradicating mass incarceration and called on Episcopalians to commit to public advocacy, both direct and through the Office of Governmental Relations, for new Federal policies addressing racial bias and profiling leading to the disproportionate incarceration of people of color. Convention also called for [alternatives to incarceration](#), [protection of inmate civil rights](#), establishment of mentoring and training programs, improved pathways to employment for former inmates, restorative justice, and a flat opposition to any “for profit” prisons or immigration detention centers. Executive Council committed financial resources to the cause of raising up the issue in our Church and in the halls of government.

Incarceration on Death Row

Advocacy for rehabilitation is a ministry to all, including those children of God who have fallen into the direst liability of the death penalty. Since [1958](#) General Convention has steadfastly [opposed the death penalty](#), in [2015](#) denouncing it as “in direct opposition to the witness of Jesus.” Activists within the Church have visited inmates on Death Row, witnessing their stories and [ministering to them](#), often on the day of execution, and have for decades organized [conferences](#) and protests to oppose capital punishment.

General Convention and presiding bishops have consistently [voiced opposition](#) to the built-in unfairness of capital punishment. The Church has been [unwavering](#) in its [opposition](#), calling for its [complete abolition](#), [recognizing](#) that it [disproportionately](#) affects the poor, people of color, and those with mental disabilities. For the prisoner, the Church advocates for humane treatment as in [the words of Presiding Bishop Browning](#) on the restoration of capital punishment in New York in 1995: “we only insist that even those who committed such crimes remain children of God, brothers and sisters of the One who sought out sinners as his earthly companions, human beings who retain the right to hope as long as they retain breath in their bodies.”

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