

# The Inside-Out Gospel

## Rehabilitating Our Criminal Justice System

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On February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2011, **Senator Jim Webb** reintroduced his landmark **National Criminal Justice Commission Act**, which would create a blue-ribbon, bipartisan commission of stakeholders charged with undertaking an 18-month top-to-bottom review of the nation's criminal justice system and offering concrete recommendations for reform.

“National organizations from across the philosophical spectrum agree that now is the time to launch this comprehensive review of our criminal justice system...We can be smarter about whom we incarcerate, improve public safety outcomes, make better use of taxpayer dollars, and bring greater fairness to our justice system... We spend a staggering **\$68 billion** every year just to keep people locked up, and we lose billions more in lost productivity due to the lack of proper re-entry programs,” said Senator Webb as he introduced the bill.

The bipartisan legislation was drafted with input and support from more than **100 organizations** from every political and philosophical perspective, including denominations and other faith-based social justice organizations (with leadership from our own **Bill Mefford** and **Laura Markle Downton** of the United Methodist's Global Board of Church & Society office), International Association of Chiefs of Police, Heritage Foundation, Sentencing Project, Fraternal Order of Police, NAACP, American Civil Liberties Union, and Prison Fellowship.

As **Michelle Alexander** (*“The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness”*, 2010) reminds us, over three-quarters (76%) of federal prisoners are racial or ethnic minorities. Including state prisons, the statistic remains at more than 60% from racial and ethnic minorities. For Black males in their twenties, **1 in every 8** is in prison or jail on any given day, due in great measure to the egregiously disproportionate impact of the increasingly vilified “war on drugs”. This is the case even though *studies consistently show that people of all colors use and sell illegal drugs at similar rates (below 10%)*.

**The United States is the world's leader in incarceration** with **2.3 million** people currently in the nation's prisons or jails—an astounding **500% increase** over the past thirty years. These trends have resulted in inhumane prison overcrowding and state governments being overwhelmed by the crushing burden of funding an exponentially expanding penal system, despite increasing evidence that large-scale incarceration is not the most effective means of achieving public safety.

This past June, two dozen inter-faith leaders invited by Bill Mefford, including myself, flew into Washington and met with key legislators and administration officials in support of rapid passage of the National Criminal Justice Commission Act. And as this goes to print, a similar delegation is in Washington appealing for funding appropriations for, and follow-up legislation to, the recently passed “**Second Chance Act**”.

Let us revisit our Call: Our **Methodist Social Principles ¶ 164 (H): “Criminal and Restorative Justice”**, declare in part:

*“...We urge the creation of a genuinely new system for the care and restoration of victims, offenders, criminal justice officials, and the community as a whole....retributive justice systems profess to hold the offender accountable to the state and use punishment as the equalizing tool...In contrast, **restorative justice** seeks to hold the offender accountable to the victimized person, and to the disrupted community...restorative justice seeks to[the extent possible] repair the damage, right the wrong, and bring healing...” [emphasis added].*

So as people of faith, specifically working for social holiness and the redemption of all people and peoples, let us--as a ***high priority***:

- ▲ **Support and multiply Jail, Detention Center, and Prison Visitation Programs.**
- ▲ **Support and multiply “Second Chance” Rehabilitation & Transition Programs.**
- ▲ **Advocate for State and Federal legislative and policy reform:**
  - Contact your congressional delegation, especially Senator Grassley (who is the ranking Republican member of the Judiciary Committee) in support of the legislation calling for a National Criminal Justice Reform Commission and for funding of Second Chance programs.
  - Oppose so-called “Secure Communities” DHS polices (we oppose unnecessary, indeterminate detention by local law enforcement--working in conjunction with ICE, of those alleged to not have civil authorization to be in the US).
  - Oppose “contracting out” to for-profit companies the public responsibility of community safety and corrections.
  - Educate congregations, communities, and elected representatives regarding the common sense principles and efficacy of “Restorative Justice”.
  - Write Letters to the Editor and use social media to educate and advocate.

If we act boldly, and smartly, we can and shall see the **Spirit** turn significant portions of our prisons *inside out*, even as we see lives lifted up and the principalities and powers that rejoice in the failures and suffering of the oppressed, turned *upside down*.