

CORRECTIONS

MAC Commission on Church & Society 5/9/13

The Montana Association of Churches (MAC) affirms and supports the progress of the State of Montana Department of Corrections toward accomplishing these positions originally set forth by MAC in 1991:

- 1. A sentencing system which permits judges and others within the justice system latitude and discretion in dealing with individual offenders; and**
- 2. Individualized correction programs which consider confinement as the least desired alternative, consistent with public safety and the offenders' needs; and**
- 3. More community corrections alternatives and resources rather than an increase in the capacity and/or the population of Montana State Prison; and**
- 4. Programs, facilities and services to treat and rehabilitate those incarcerated looking toward their reintegration into society.**

DRAFT of New Supporting Statement

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What our Scriptures Say

Jesus commanded us to visit the prisoners (Matthew 25), and lifted up Isaiah's prophetic vision of a world in which the chains of the prisoners and the oppressed would be loosed. In both Jewish and Christian scriptures, we are commanded to "treat others as we would want to be treated." This commandment applies to all, including those who commit crimes or violate the social order. We are to treat them as we would want to be treated in that circumstance. Justice and incarceration, when deserved and necessary, must be humane, accompanied by substantial opportunities for restitution, reconciliation and eventual reintegration for most offenders into society.

Nowhere in Jewish or Christian scriptures are humans commanded by God to seek unlimited vengeance. Even the early Hebrew law of 'an eye for an eye' meant that punishment must only be commensurate with the crime. However restrictive for reasons of public safety, punishment and incarceration must not be unlimited, destructive of any person's humanity, nor destructive of family and community well-being.

Our Challenge to Montana Religious and Civic Leaders

The legitimate goals of the criminal justice system, "retribution, deterrence, incarceration and rehabilitation" in Justice Kennedy's words, still must fit under the framework of justice and the dignity of every human being as a part of the human family:

"To be sure, the prisoner has violated the social contract; to be sure, he must be punished to vindicate the law, to acknowledge the suffering of the victim, and to deter future crimes. Still, the prisoner is a person; still, he or she is part of the family of humankind. (Justice Kennedy, 2003 American Bar Association Address)

As people of faith who experience the presence of God everywhere and in everyone, and who seek justice and mercy in this world, we are called to examine the ways in which our criminal justice system in Montana, however well-intentioned, still fails to meet the standards of justice and does not promote the health and wholeness of the community.

Current Objectives of Montana Association of Churches

In the light of our common faith traditions and scriptural vision, we identify the following two initiatives as worthy of support by MAC at the statewide policy and legislative level, and by grassroots community action from our member congregations, in concert with other faith communities and community or state agencies.

- 1) Keep youth/young adult offenders in the community rather than in adult prison facilities, provide separated incarceration programs with the goal of full rehabilitation and reintegration into society, review mandatory sentencing requirements to reduce incarceration rates, and provide increased incentives and funding for alternatives to incarceration.
- 2) Support and participate in the statewide Re-Entry Initiative to provide every offender released from a facility with the tools needed to succeed in the community, including housing, employment, training, needed mental health/addiction treatment. and social support.

At the local community level, faith congregations can play a vital role in the Reentry Initiative by helping offenders and their families transition successfully, through housing resources, employment, mentoring, emotional and spiritual support. Faith congregations can be encourage to form city or county-wide collaboratlves, in order to to work more effectively with local DOC officials in responding to needs of released offenders.

At the statewide policy and legislative level, MAC can play a vital role in developing and supporting legislation to fund the Re-entry Initiative programs.