



For Immediate Release
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National Christian Leaders Oppose Mass Incarceration

Newark, NJ—Christian leaders sat transfixed as Rev. Darren Ferguson, pastor of Mount Carmel Baptist Church in Far Rockaway, NY, told the story of his decline from adolescent years with promise to incarceration and God’s power to restore and redeem. The leaders of Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A represent the broadest coalition of church leaders in the United States, including: Historic Protestant, Evangelical/Pentecostal, Catholic, Orthodox, and Historic Black Churches. They came together for the group’s annual meeting in Newark, NJ, February 4-7. On this night, the leaders were struck by one thing: Jesus loves the prisoner and he was one.

For the past six years, CCT has educated itself and taken action on issues of poverty, racial justice, and immigration reform. This year, the group furthered its commitment to these issues by engaging the issue of mass incarceration in the U.S.

The message was clear from speakers that included formerly incarcerated faith leaders, a federal judge, a former prosecutor, a director of state corrections and a social worker, as well as the deliberation among CCT participants: Mass Incarceration is not just an issue. It is first and foremost about people created in God’s image with lives, families, hopes, and dreams ensnared within a web of personal struggles and choices exacerbated by social conditions, laws, structures, and historic dehumanization of people of color.

Mass incarceration is a destructive system of human control where certain ethnic minorities experience inequitable interaction with the nation’s penal system. Current realities include:

- With only 5 percent of the world’s population, the U.S has 25 percent of the world’s imprisoned people. ([The Sentencing Project](#))
- Incarceration rates have increased from 500,000 inmates in jail and prison in 1980 to more than 2.2 million in 2010. ([The Sentencing Project](#))
- For-profit prison companies commonly demand 90 percent occupancy from the states that contract with them. ([6 Shocking Revelations about how private prisons make money](#), by April M. Short on Salon.com)
- CCA and Geo Group, the nation’s two major private prison companies, “have had a hand in shaping and pushing for criminal justice policies such as mandatory minimum sentences that favor increased incarceration.” ([In the Public Interest Report](#), September 2013)
- The “War on Drugs” dramatically increased the U.S. prison population from 41,000 drug offenders in 1980 to half a million in 2010. ([The Sentencing Project](#))
- African Americans make up 13 percent of the U.S. population and use drugs at the same rates as people of other races, but represent 45 percent of those imprisoned for drug violations. ([Drug Policy Alliance Report](#))

- Criminal prosecutions of immigration suspects in federal court districts along the U.S. southern border have increased by 1,475 percent over the last 20 years resulting in increased demand for prisons and detention centers to hold inmates ([War on Undocumented Immigrants Threatens to Swell U.S. Prison Population](#), by Chris Kirkham on Huffington Post and [TRAC Reports](#))
- 1 in 3 Black men and 1 in 6 Latino men are likely to be imprisoned in their lifetime. Only 1 in 17 white men will experience the inside of a jail or prison in his lifetime. ([The Sentencing Project](#))

In light of these facts and others corroborated by the personal testimonies of several speakers, agreement among CCT's leaders was palpable. The group declared:

The church in the United States has a moral and ethical imperative to protect human dignity and must address the problem of mass incarceration in our nation.

First, we recognize that the legacy of the dehumanization of people of color has borne lasting effects in current-day society. These effects are perhaps most acutely experienced by our African-American brothers and sisters who were deemed non-human, "chattel," by law in the days of antebellum slavery and whose human equality was challenged by the Jim Crow system of subjugation until passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 attempted to right it. We see the vestiges of these systems of human control in America's current system of mass incarceration.

Second, we recognize that these systems are not only affecting African-Americans. They are now impacting all people of color, the poor, the marginalized, and the immigrant in the United States. Latinos and other immigrants, in particular, are experiencing the brunt of increased detention rates in the midst of their struggle for immigration reform.

Third, while there is a role for prisons to address violent offenses, we recognize that our nation's justice system has lost the hope embodied by its historic vision to "correct" and restore broken people back to society. As followers of Jesus Christ, we believe in the redemption and reconciliation of all things, rather than retribution. This includes the prisoner and broken systems. This is the essence of the gospel.

As Christian leaders, CCT declared: "Mass incarceration must stop. We are challenging ourselves together with government and the nation to seize this moment when multiple forces are aligning toward positive action to correct the injustices within our 'justice' system."

CCT in the U.S.A. is encouraging its member denominations and organizations to increase awareness, educate, and take action to oppose mass incarceration in the public square. CCT also committed to developing guiding principles for the Church in its efforts.