

## UNITED PARISH IN BROOKLINE

### STATEMENT IN OPPOSITION TO MASS INCARCERATION

We, the members of the United Parish in Brookline gathered in an All-Parish Meeting held on June 21, 2015, believe that simple justice and sound policy call for the end of mass incarceration as the outcome of our criminal justice system as it operates at present. We call on our federal and state elected officials to take immediate steps to dismantle the system of mass incarceration in the United States and in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and to enact appropriate reforms of the criminal justice system.

As Christians we believe in the worth of each individual and that all of us should be treated fairly, equally, and with an opportunity to reach our full potential in society. We are mindful of the Prophet Isaiah's admonitions that we ought not "write oppressive statutes" but should "loose the bonds of injustice." (Isaiah 10:1 and 58:6). And in the Gospels, Jesus declared we should "bring good news to the poor" and always remember to treat the "least of these" with dignity. (Luke 4:18, Matthew 25: 45).

1. The reasons that support our call for an end to mass incarceration include:

- The United States, as a result of public policy choices adopted in recent decades, now leads the world in the number of people in prison. With only 5% of the world's population the U.S. now has 25% of the world's prisoners. Our prison population has increased from 300,000 to 2.3 million
- The Massachusetts prison population has increased five-fold since 1975, even though our violent crime rate today is equivalent to what it was in 1975 and our property crime rate has dropped by half
- Minorities have been treated in a markedly unfair and discriminatory way under our penal policies. While Massachusetts incarcerates its residents at a lower rate than most other states, our incarceration rate for White prisoners is half the national rate, for Blacks it rises to two-thirds of the national rate, and for Hispanics the state's incarceration rate actually exceeds the national rate by 12%.
- Our prisons are populated by people who need drug treatment, mental health treatment, or other support whose opportunity for rehabilitation is undermined due to our reliance on more expensive prison cells
- Current rules discourage the use of programs that help prisoners prepare to reenter their communities after their sentences have been served, unthinkingly displace rehabilitation as a goal of our penal system, and result in higher recidivism rates
- We have lost sight of the principle that punishment should be proportional to the crime and that reasoned discretion should be exercised to tailor the punishment to fit the crime.

2. We call upon our federal and state elected representatives and other government officials to enact criminal justice reforms that

- Adopt policies that abolish the disparate treatment of persons who are accused, convicted, or sentenced for a criminal act so that all persons may be treated fairly and without discrimination
- Dismantle the existing system of mass incarceration
- Substitute evidence-based best practices that appropriately balance individual needs with public safety for our existing criminal justice system
- Adopt a justice reinvestment approach that uses taxpayer dollars effectively
- Repeal mandatory minimum sentencing laws, especially for non-violent drug offenses
- Restore fairness in sentencing by allowing the judge – the only neutral party in the criminal justice system – to be the person who can make just sentencing decisions based on an individualized assessment of the circumstances of the crime and the role played by the defendant
- Repeal statutory restrictions on parole or probation release and supervision and incentives, such as earned good time credits, for participation in job training and other rehabilitation programs
- Reexamine and undo the collateral consequences of criminal indictments and convictions -- including eligibility for public benefit programs or the loss of drivers' licenses with a \$500 reinstatement fee – so persons convicted of crimes may get jobs and reintegrate into the community
- Re-examine and improve the fairness of pre-trial bail procedures
- Impose a moratorium on the expansion of prison capacity.

3. We want to communicate the United Parish's position on dismantling mass incarceration and for criminal justice reform to

- The American Baptist, the United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist denominations of which the United Parish in Brookline is a part and to other faith-based communities
- Our state or federal elected officials
- Other individuals or organizations as appropriate

4. The Stretching Into Justice Ministry at the United Parish, together with individual members of our congregation, will

- Pursue nonpartisan advocacy on behalf of the United Parish for the reform of the state and federal criminal justice systems
- Continue their efforts to educate and inform the members of the United Parish and others outside our church about mass incarceration and the need for criminal justice reform
- Enroll the United Parish in Brookline as a participating organization in the Jobs NOT Jails coalition or join with other appropriate organizations in pursuit of the goal of dismantling mass incarceration.