A Prophetic Call to:
Dismantle Mass Incarceration & the Criminalization of Race
Alliance of Baptists — Annual Meeting
Portland, Maine • May 3, 2014

The Alliance of Baptists is committed to the larger body of Jesus Christ, expressed in various Christian traditions, and to cooperation with believers everywhere in giving full expression to the Gospel; the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ and the calling of God to all peoples to repentance and faith, reconciliation and hope, social and economic justice; and the pursuit of justice with and for those who are oppressed. 1

Furthermore, the Alliance Racial Justice and Multiculturalism Community is committed to cultivating leaders to shepherd the work of building a multicultural organization committed to racial justice and reconciliation in our congregations, ministries and the broader society.2

It is with these commitments in mind that we sound the call to join the broader Christian and interfaith community in speaking out against the system of mass incarceration and the negative impact it has had on communities of color and poor people. We commit to take action to dismantle this system and advocate for more restorative forms of justice.

As Michelle Alexander, author of The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration In the Age of Colorblindness, has observed, contemporary mass incarceration is a form of racialized social control that creates “a lower caste of individuals who are permanently barred by law and custom from mainstream society.”3 It is a symptom of systematized oppression within our systems of criminal justice that produce racialized outcomes.

Christian Churches Together recently released a statement outlining the impact of mass incarceration:

- 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)
- Forprofit 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)

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• 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.  

Fueled by — and creating — greed and racial anxiety, mass incarceration has had a dehumanizing and detrimental impact on US society. It traumatizes and destroys families and communities, reinforces racial and economic disparities, and incentivizes the creation of a permanent underclass. We call upon congregations, clergy, members and partners of the Alliance of Baptists to invest in the formation of prophetic congregations and communities in the movement to end mass incarceration and restore the dignity of individuals, families and communities. Such action would include — but is not limited to:

• Education and training on the intersections of faith, race, class and mass incarceration, by way of Bible studies, book studies, community forums and experiences with those most impacted by mass incarceration.

• Participation and prophetic leadership in local, state and national campaigns that seek to dismantle and heal the detrimental impacts of mass incarceration:
  * Re-entry support for those formerly incarcerated, to gain access to jobs, housing, healthcare, food, etc.
  * Sentencing laws and practices that are fair across race and class and that seek restorative versus punitive outcomes.
  * Deincentivization to build and enlarge prisons both public and private for the sake of cheap labor and profit.
  * Voting rights restoration for those who have paid their debt to society.

• Support to ecumenical and interfaith groups fighting to dismantle mass incarceration and the criminalization of race.

• Authorization of and cooperation with Alliance leadership in their participation in the movement to end mass incarceration and the criminalization of race.

Ending mass incarceration is critical for the healing of individuals and communities, for achieving racial and economic inclusion in our nation, and for building the Beloved Community in our world. We are called not only to visit those in prison (Matthew 25), but also to seek the healing and restoration of those impacted by this system of social control. It is with this healing in mind that we sound the call to the Alliance of Baptists to lead in the struggle to dismantle mass incarceration and the criminalization of race.

— Submitted March 13, 2014 to Alliance of Baptists Board of Directors by the Racial Justice & Multiculturalism Community of the Alliance of Baptists

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