

# Peace and Justice news



February 2016 Vol. 12, No. 1

## Peace and Justice Committee

Eastern District Conference  
Franconia Mennonite Conference  
Mennonite Church USA

An occasional newsletter for local church peace representatives

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## Pastoring our Prisoners<sup>1,2</sup>

*... for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.*  
– Matthew 25:35-36

The Bible is full of stories about people who spent time in prison (Joseph, Jeremiah, Daniel, Shadrack, John the Baptist, Paul ...) and people who surely deserved punishment for their violent crimes (Moses, David, Rahab, Peter who cut off the ear of the high priest's servant, ...)

One of the things we have to do is stop bringing Christ to jail, because we are really too late. Jesus meets us in the prison; Jesus meets us in the jail. But we don't bring Christ to the inmate; we don't bring Christ to the prison. And God's people have learned from their experience to trust in God even when they make mistakes. And the truth of the matter is that all of us make mistakes; some of them just happen to have criminal effects.

When Paul was in prison, the church remembered him and prayed for him. Do you remember that he said, "And my God shall supply all your needs according to his riches and glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19)? He's talking to the church that remembered him while he was in prison. One of the things that Paul could count on, was that even though he was a convict; even though he was incarcerated; even though he was a resident of Graterford or Frackville or whatever county jail, his church remembered him. How scandalous that our inmates are not remembered by their own churches.

If you get sick, the whole church rallies around you, but if you get locked up, you get three volunteers from somebody else's church; yet both are on the same list in Matthew 25: sick people and prisoners. Why do we treat one group one way and one group the other? The numbers are clear. One in 28 people in Pennsylvania is under some form of correctional control. All of our churches have members or families with somebody who is locked up. And yet we don't want to remember them. We don't want to think about them; the pain may be too great. Or maybe the shame is too great. There is the shame factor that comes with incarceration, that the world has given, and we in the church have bought into it. We are ashamed of our own child or parent who is incarcerated. Isn't it time to rethink our pastoral care for prisoners?

## Breaking the Chains of Mass Incarceration Barriers to Reentry<sup>1,3</sup>

Over 90% of all incarcerated people will sooner or later be released back into our communities, but one in every 2.3 of them will wind up re-incarcerated within 3 years. Why is this? There are so many barriers to reentry that most returning citizens need the strong support of family members or others to stay out of jail. Issues such as drug or alcohol addiction, mental health, lack of education, poverty, and unemployment which often contribute to incarceration in the first place are rarely addressed in our overcrowded prisons.



(continued on page 2)

### **Court Costs, Fines, and Debt Collection**

It is reasonable and appropriate that someone who has caused harm be expected to provide some sort of compensation to their victims or survivors. However, the corrections system now imposes a lot of additional financial penalties, which force some returning citizens or their families into oppressive debt, and which therefore may interfere with making restitution to victims.

When someone is incarcerated at the Lancaster County prison, for some low level drug possession charges, for example, the docket sheet will include items on the list of fines and costs such as the \$29.95 Court Automation Upgrade Fee and the \$11.50 Bail Administration Processing Fee, and the \$300 Booking Fee – so that someone who goes into Lancaster County prison for a low level drug possession charge may actually come out with several thousand dollars of court fees that have been imposed. In addition, many county jails are starting to charge room and board for the people who are incarcerated there, and when those people get released they get a bill for their room and board. And in some counties, where officials have not been satisfied with the collection rate, those debts are now turned over to collection agencies that add collection fees and interest.

On top of that, probation and parole departments charge supervision fees. They will charge a standard monthly supervision fee; and then if you have been required to wear an electronic monitor, or even worse, what's called a SCRAM bracelet—it's clamped onto your leg, periodically checks for blood alcohol, and reports back to a central reporting system. There are daily fees for those monitoring devices, racking up additional hundreds of dollars of debt. Many returning citizens are mandated to participate in drug and alcohol, domestic violence, or anger management classes, and many of the service providers charge a fee for those classes. Some people are required to get a drug and alcohol evaluation which usually costs about \$200, and many are required to get a mental health evaluation or a psychiatric evaluation which can cost several hundred dollars; and if you do not do all of these things that are required as a condition of your probation and parole, and if you do not make payments against all of these fines and costs not only are you subject to late fees and interest and penalties by the collection agencies, but you are at risk of being reincarcerated for non payment. So we have absolutely reinstated debtors prison in this country.

### **Employment**

What happens when a prisoner is released, and the probation officer says, “you need to have a job within 30 days; you had better be working, and you better start making payments on your fines and court-imposed costs.” Not only do returning citizens have a criminal record which is a tremendous barrier to finding a job, but they may not even have any forms of

identification such as a driver's license or photo ID; they may not know where their birth certificate or social security card is; and you cannot get a job, at least not an above-the-table job, if you cannot supply several forms of identification that prove that you are a U.S. citizen or legal immigrant and that you have the right to work in this country.

Nearly 50% of the people in our prisons lack a high school diploma; many have learning disabilities; many of them lack basic workplace skills. Some people, such as those who first entered prison as youth or young adults may have no experience holding a job or knowing what it's like. Was there anyone to provide a role model in the home where they grew up? Access to transportation can be another major barrier to finding and keeping a job.

For people leaving prison, Pennsylvania has:

- 24 laws limiting housing options
  - 22 laws limiting governmental benefits
  - 679 laws limiting employment & occupational certification & licensing
- Some of these restrictions are permanent, continuing even after:
- Sentence completed
  - Probation/parole completed
  - Fines, costs, restitution paid
- Some of these laws are appropriate; many are not.

### **Addiction / Mental Health issues**

For people released from prison with addictions and mental health needs, major issues include access to medications and health insurance, the cost of insurance, the cost of treatment and access to treatment. In Lancaster County people are released from prison at either 6:00am or 6:00pm. They are released with a three day supply of any medications they may have been taking while in prison. A three day supply is not generally sufficient to get an appointment with a physician to renew a prescription, let alone the problem of how to pay for a doctor's appointment or pay for medications..

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections has about 50,000 people in custody, primarily in 26 state correctional institutions (prisons), 6% above capacity

Reasons for incarceration:

- 46% violent crime
- 39% non-violent offenses
- 15% parole violation

1 in 28 people in Pennsylvania is under correctional control, including prisons, jails, and probation

1. These reports are based primarily on presentations at the October 23-26 conference on Mass Incarceration in Harrisburg, PA See our web page ([efjpc.ppj.org](http://efjpc.ppj.org)) for links to conference-related resources including youtube recordings of several of the keynote presentations.
2. This commentary is based on the Oct. 23rd sermon by Harold Dean Trulear, Assoc. Professor of Applied Theology, Howard University, and Director, Healing Communities Prison Ministry, Philadelphia.
3. This report is based primarily on the presentations of Melanie G. Snyder, Executive Director, Lancaster County RMO.

## Breaking Down Walls / Turning Swords Into Plowshares<sup>†</sup>

*God's people will beat their swords into plows and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not rise up against nation, and they will study war no more. – Isaiah 2:4*

Shane Claiborne in his usual style of speaking – one story after another -- gave some inspiring examples of breaking through the barriers that separate us – in Israel-Palestine, in Iraq, on the U.S.-Mexico border; and barriers to hungry and homeless people in Ft. Lauderdale and Philadelphia.

Right now there is a prayer on the front door at The Simple Way (where Shane lives) painted as a mural, and it says, “*Heal, O God, everything that is broken in our hearts and in our homes and in our streets. Heal this broken world.*”

On the Friday before Easter, Shane and friends carried a cross to one of the Philadelphia gun shops near where Shane lives. They read the story of Jesus' violent execution, and the story of the women weeping at the foot of the cross, and then they listened as some women and men told stories of losing their own children to gun violence.

God understands our pain; God aches with those who ache; God weeps with those who weep, and God also invites us to imagine that the tears, the death, the blood doesn't get the last word; and in the end the tomb is empty. Inspired by Isaiah 2:4, they said, “What are we waiting on? Just as Jesus turned death into life, we are going to love those who hurt us, and we're going to transform the things of death into things that bring life.” Early Christian authors used that text from Isaiah to say “this is what Christians do.” About 200 people are killed by guns (homicide) each year in Philadelphia, and about 11,000 across the country. And so there are blacksmiths who started a group called RAW Tools. (If you turn “war” backward, it's “raw” -- so RAW Tools.) “They gave us some welding lessons; we ended up learning some blacksmithing skills, and we invited people to send us their guns.” It's amazing what you can do with Twitter and Facebook. They said send us your guns, and people did! They got an AK47. The man who sent it said, “I'm not sure what good is going to come of it. So I'm giving it to you.” People from all over the world have sent pictures of their creations. There is a guitar made out of hand guns, and it actually plays music; there is a man who made a saxophone out of a semiautomatic rifle. Some people in Iran took guns, poured them into the street, and rolled over them and crushed them with a steam roller and even let the kids drive (with parental supervision, of course.)

In Philadelphia they took a handgun from an abandoned house, heated it up at the forge, and with their blacksmithing friends invited mothers and fathers who had lost children. One mom took a hammer, and she began to beat that gun, and there was something mystical and visceral and powerful. With every thump of the hammer, she began to weep. She had a picture of her son on her shirt. And as she beat on that gun, she said this is for my boy. The photo below shows the

garden tool they made that day. Next to the tool is the remnant of that same handgun that she crushed.

Because Shane didn't have to go through Airport Security, on the way to Bethlehem, he brought it along with him, and invited folks to come, to touch, and to remember that this is what we do. We transform death into life, and interrupt patterns that destroy people's dignity, that force people to live behind walls. We are people of law and people of peace.



<sup>†</sup> This report is based on Shane Claiborne's presentation at the close of the annual Christmas Peace Pilgrimage from Nazareth to Bethlehem, PA on December 12, 2015. Also see [rawtools.org](http://rawtools.org).

### Prison Reform, inch by inch

#### Treatment of Pennsylvania Prisoners with Severe Mental Illness

Last month Pennsylvania's Department of Human Services (DHS) settled a lawsuit brought in October by the ACLU on behalf of hundreds of defendants with severe mental illness who have been ordered by a court to receive mental health treatment but have been waiting for months in county jails, sometimes in solitary confinement, to get into one of two state mental hospitals (Norristown and Torrance). The settlement requires that new “placement options” be created within six months, to eliminate the current waiting list of more than 200 people for about 190 slots.

#### Sentencing Reform for Juvenile Offenders

The U.S. Supreme Court in 2012 ruled to ban mandatory life sentences for juveniles and recently extended the ban retroactively to include all prisoners sentenced as juveniles. Approximately 2,600 inmates nationwide serve life without parole sentences for crimes they committed as juveniles. About 480 of them in Pennsylvania—the most of any U.S. jurisdiction—must be released or allowed to seek resentencing or parole hearings.

#### Solitary Confinement


Also in January President Obama announced changes to federal prison practices that include banning solitary confinement for juvenile offenders and for other prisoners who have committed low-level infractions. There are about 100,000 prisoners kept in solitary confinement in U.S. federal, state, and local lock-ups, but only those in federal prisons—about 10,000 of them—will be affected by the President's action

# Peace and Justice Calendar

**Undoing Racism Training and Resources**  
**“Changing Racism: A Personal Approach to Multiculturalism, Inclusion and Equity”**  
 – **April 1-3, 2016** (Fri. 6:30pm - Sun. 3:00 pm)  
 – **October 28-30, 2016** (Fri. 6:30pm - Sun. 3:00 pm)  
 2016 sessions will be at Dalesford Abbey in Paoli, PA  
 See [efjpc.pjpr.org/undoracism](http://efjpc.pjpr.org/undoracism) for details on these sessions and MCUSA “Tools for Racial Healing.”

**Drones: Protest and Peacemaking**  
**Feb. 12, 2016** (Friday, 4-5pm) Philadelphia, PA.  
**“Philly Anti-War ‘Reach Out’ to Stop the Drone War Command Center in Horsham, PA”**  
 Location: SEPTA entrance/west side of City Hall, NW corner, 15th & Market Streets, Philadelphia, 19102  
**For details**, and other related events see:  
[www.brandywinepeace.com/events/](http://www.brandywinepeace.com/events/)  
**June 24-25, 2016** (tentative) Friday afternoon and Saturday.  
**“Our Faithful Witness: Voting for Security and Peace in a Drone-Prone World”** This conference would follow the Pennsylvania primary election (April 26, 2016) and focus on equipping churches, mosques and synagogues to witness faithfully to humanity’s God-inspired longings for nonviolence and peace as our militarized society prepares to vote in the November 8, 2016 elections.

**February 15, 2016** (9:00am-4:30pm) Allentown, PA  
**Climate Disruption is a Moral Issue: Interfaith Climate Advocacy Training**  
 sponsored by PA Interfaith Power and Light, the Eco-Justice Working Group, and the Creation Care Task Force of the NEPA Synod (ELCA). This is a day of preparation for people of all faiths during which you will learn how to speak with moral authority on the issue of climate change in Pennsylvania.  
 Location: NE PA Lutheran Center, 2354 Grove Rd., Allentown, PA  
 For details and registration, see <http://paipl.us/event/climate-disruption-is-a-moral-issue-interfaith-climate-advocacy-training-allentown/>



**A Win for Walmart Workers**  
 In 2013 Walmart threatened, disciplined, and even fired a number of workers who were bold enough to speak out about the issues they faced working at Walmart. Now a judge has ruled that Walmart’s actions were illegal and that it must offer those workers reinstatement and back pay.  
 Walmart employees view this as a huge victory not for just those workers but for Walmart workers everywhere. The judge also stated that Walmart must hold a meeting in a number of stores informing workers of their rights to strike, collectively bargain, and join a union.

**2016 Pennsylvania Budget Summit**  
**Thursday, March 3, 2016** (9:00am-3:30pm) Harrisburg, PA  
 On February 9, as the FY2015-16 budget stalemate continues, Governor Wolf will deliver his annual budget address, introducing a proposed budget for 2016-17. The **Pennsylvania Budget and Policy Center’s** annual Budget Summit will provide an in-depth look at the Governor’s 2016-17 budget proposal, including what it means for education, health and human services, the environment and local communities. And, of course, if the 2015-2016 budget is not complete by then, we will also be talking about the various alternatives still under consideration.  
 The event is free, but space is limited and pre-registration is required. PBPC welcomes donations of any size to help off-set costs. See <http://pennbpc.org/2016budgetsummit>  
 Location: Hilton Hotel, 1 North Second St., Harrisburg PA 17101

**April 15-18, 2016** (Fri. evening – Mon.) Washington, DC area  
**Ecumenical Advocacy Days** *“Lift Every Voice! – Racism, Class & Power.”* Workshops on U.S. domestic issues, ecojustice, Latin America, Jubilee economics, Africa, Asia-Pacific, and the Middle East, co-sponsored by MCC Washington Office. See [www.advocacydays.org](http://www.advocacydays.org)

**May 1, 2016** (Sunday) - Philadelphia Interfaith Peace Walk  
 “Emerging Leaders’ Voices for Peace and Justice”  
 For details, see [www.interfaithpeacewalk.org](http://www.interfaithpeacewalk.org)

**New Resources**

- **Starter Kit for Teaching and Learning on Mass Incarceration.** The National Council of Churches Convening Table on Christian Education, Ecumenical Faith Formation, and Leadership Development has developed this resource over the past several months. It is a toolbox replete with various offerings intended to inform and engage individuals, small groups, congregations, and classrooms alike. The kit is available free at [http://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/images/CEEFFLD\\_2015\\_SKTL\\_MI.pdf](http://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/images/CEEFFLD_2015_SKTL_MI.pdf)
- **Infographic # BlackLivesMatter**



JPEG image available free at [http://www.faireconomy.org/state\\_of\\_the\\_dream\\_2016\\_blacklivesmatter\\_and\\_the\\_economy](http://www.faireconomy.org/state_of_the_dream_2016_blacklivesmatter_and_the_economy)