



# **Christian Witness in a Prison State**

LEADER GUIDE

*LEADER GUIDE*  
SESSION #1: RETHINKING CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Goal for the session:

To provide an overview to the topic of mass incarceration, giving a broad background from which the next two sessions will draw and expand.

Preparation for the session:

1. Secure enough copies of the Participant Folder for each person in attendance.
2. Try to obtain access to a dry-erase board, chalkboard, or newsprint for each class session. As significant comments or questions arise, feel free to write them out for the class.
3. If possible, read or browse some of the “Resources for Deeper Engagement” at the end of this session in the Participant Folder, listed here:

**Books**

*The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (Alexander, 2010)

*Prison State: The Challenge of Mass Incarceration* (Useem & Piehl, 2008)

*Mothers Behind Bars* (The National Women’s Law Center, 2010)

**Websites**

The National Religious Campaign Against Torture: [www.nrcat.org](http://www.nrcat.org)

The American Friends Service Committee: [www.afsc.org](http://www.afsc.org)

The Sentencing Project: [www.sentencingproject.org](http://www.sentencingproject.org)

Beyond Bars: [www.beyondbars.org](http://www.beyondbars.org)

The American Civil Liberties Union: [www.aclu.org](http://www.aclu.org)

**Films/Video Clips**

*The House I Live In* (full length documentary)

*Religion & Ethics: Mass Incarceration* (7:42 video):

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/?p=10091>

*The REAL Cost of the War on Drugs* (3:32 video): <http://youtu.be/nTZNPGeYUgg>

*David Simon: What’s Behind the War on Drugs* (15:14 video):

<http://youtu.be/MUh1BINuXj0>

Additional Teaching Tips:

1. Take a deep breath. Facilitating these kinds of educational programs is a difficult task. Expect contention, conflict, and discomfort. This material does not require you to lecture nor to take an aggressive position. You have the important role of simply generating interest and encouraging sensitive and meaningful dialogue.
2. Take time to prepare, but do not feel pressure to have ready answers to the questions that arise. Questions motivate investigation and participation, whereas quick answers can quench curiosity and deeper involvement. Encourage these questions, and direct participants to chase their inquiries using the above resource list, which is provided in their folders.

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**Intro (5 minutes)**

1. Distribute Participant Folder and writing utensil to each attendee.
2. Introduce yourself, and (if appropriate) give each participant a chance to introduce him/herself to the group.
3. Introduce the series “Just Imprisonment? Faithfully Responding to Mass Incarceration.”  
Orient the group to the three-part structure of the series:  
    Session #1: (This week) Rethinking Criminal Justice  
    Session #2: Prisons: Correction vs. Corruption  
    Session #3: Exploring a Faithful Response
4. Explain that issues of social justice and faith are often contentious and divisive, and cast a vision for a challenging, yet fruitful time of study and reflection.

**Opening Prayer (1-2 min)**

Holy and Just God,

We approach you this morning with hearts and minds that are heavy from the toils and stresses of this week. Almighty God, liberate us that we might sit openly here in your presence. We approach this issue cautiously, mindful of the anxieties and passions that this study might conjure. Holy Spirit, move in us that we might be courageous enough to learn, to grow, to heal, and to change. We desire your peace and your grace. Open our eyes and our minds not just to the violence and injustice around us, but also to the opportunities and possibilities of healing, forgiveness, and peace. We ask this all in the name of the Living Christ, **Amen.**

**“Crime By the Numbers” Activity (15 min)**

*Give participants 5 minutes to fill in the blanks, guessing the number for each statistic. Once they are finished, read the correct answers (and details in parentheses):*

1. Between 1970 and 2005, the U.S. prison population rose by 700 %  
(This rate far outpaces the general population growth and crime rates)
2. The United States has 5% of the world’s population, but has 25 % of the world’s prison population  
(The U.S. leads every other country in the world in both prison rates and prison population)
3. There are currently 2.2 million people behind bars in the United States, and one in 100 American adults is behind bars.  
(China, which has four times the population of the U.S., only has 1.6 million people in its prisons)
4. Drug-related crimes account for nearly half of sentences being served in federal prison. Of all the drug-related arrests in 2011, roughly 80 % were for possession only—not distribution, property, or violent criminal behavior.  
(As a result of drug policing and sentencing, the chances of receiving a prison sentence following an arrest increased by more than 50% from 1980 to 1990; also the average length of sentences served increased by nearly 40%)

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5. One out of every 30 prisoners is serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole. Of these persons, 79 % committed nonviolent drug crimes.  
(The U.S. criminal justice system is a global outlier in its use of mandatory minimum sentences and “three-strikes” laws for drug offenses)
6. Due to excessive court costs and the threat of colossal maximum sentences, 97 % of all federal cases and 94 % of state cases are resolved by guilty pleas without a trial.  
(This system of piling multiple charges, even for nonviolent criminal allegations, allows the criminal justice system to prosecute ten times more cases than if these cases were resolved by trial)
7. African-Americans comprise 13% of the U.S. population but are incarcerated at 6 times the rate of whites. An estimated one in every 3 black males will serve a prison sentence during his lifetime.  
(Although rates of drug use and sale is roughly the same across racial and ethnic demographics, blacks are 13 times more likely to be imprisoned for drug crimes than whites)
8. 2.7 million children are growing up in U.S. households in which one or more parents are incarcerated.  
(2/3 of these parents are serving sentences for nonviolent offenses)
9. Currently, there are more women in prison than at any point in U.S. history. Only 7 states require medical exams as part of prenatal care. 22 states either ignore or allow the indiscriminant use of leg or waist shackles on prisoners giving birth, and 31 states have no policy to hold institutions accountable for the unjustified shackling of pregnant women.
10. The United States spends \$ 70 billion per year on our system of correctional control.  
(Over the last 30 years, state spending for prisons grew at 6 times the rate of spending for education)

*After finishing this activity, ask, “Do any of these statistics surprise you?” Invite a few people to share their responses.*

**Discussion (20 min)**

*Have participants read “Christians and Mass Incarceration” and respond to the Discussion Questions (either individually, in small groups, or in a large group).*

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Christians and Mass Incarceration  
*By Mark Osler*  
*From the Huffington Post, 10/25/2013*

The United States leads the Western world in our reliance on incarceration. Slowly, there seems to be a growing awareness that we are spending billions, limiting freedoms, and creating racial disparities through an over-broad approach to imprisonment as the primary tool of criminal law. While incarcerating people may have the positive effect of incapacitating truly dangerous people (especially in relation to violent crimes), too often we lock up those who don't present a high level of danger to others. As states and the federal government consider moves to correct this imbalance, Christians should be leading the way.

It's not hard to trace the causes of this problem. First, we over-reacted to narcotics trafficking and incarcerated wide swaths of low-wage labor in that business -- workers who were easily replaced. This was a project that proved wasteful and pointless.

Second, our society too often fosters a "lock them up and forget them" mentality towards those who have committed crimes, and this allows us to accept lengthy prison terms as normal. Little thought is given to what happens when a man or woman crosses the threshold into prison.

For Christians, this system violates the basic rule of compassion and balance that infuses the morality of the faith. Mandatory minimum sentencing laws, in particular, bar any role for mercy. This result is utterly inconsistent with Jesus's teachings and actions, which emphasized mercy in our dealings with one another.

However, it is the second of these impulses that should be especially repugnant to Christians. In Matthew 25, Jesus issued one of his clearest directives: That when we visit those in prison, we visit him. It's a stunning and troubling mandate, given that it came without qualification -- an explanation that we are to visit the innocent in prison, or those who are particularly sympathetic.

It is a clear countermand to our "lock them up and throw away the key" ethic. Given the clarity of Christ's teachings, we should expect Christian groups to be in the forefront of those opposing mass incarceration (as some already are). One stumbling block may be the moralism which often goes with faith -- the instinct to draw bright lines. We don't see those bright lines, though, in the life of Jesus, who stopped an execution that was required by the law of Moses. He saved the adulteress described in John 8 by challenging the moral right of those about to kill her: "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." No one challenged bright lines like Jesus.

Finally, criminal law should be a key issue for Christians simply because of who Jesus was. Many of us believe that the events in Christ's life did not happen randomly; rather, his story was crafted to teach us what was eternally important. He was born into poverty, and each year we recreate that scene in our homes and remember how great things can come from the impoverished.

Similarly, doesn't it matter that so much of what we know about Jesus is in his role as a criminal defendant? God intended him to be prosecuted, even executed, and that must mean that these things are important.

Criminal law in the United States rests unsteadily on the backs of the multitude of Christian legislators, prosecutors, judges, and academics. It is time to unsettle that realm, and the moral wrong at its heart.

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Discussion Questions

1. What thoughts and/or emotions are you experiencing through this educational material?
2. Mark Osler drew our attention to the passages in Matthew 25 and John 8 about restoration and forgiveness. How might these themes challenge our current system of criminal justice? Can you think of any other Biblical passages or Christian doctrines or themes that might also bear on this topic?
3. Write down any remaining questions that you would like to ask pertaining to this or similar topics.

**Closing (5-10 min)**

1. Offer a time for participants to voice questions and concerns. (This is not a Q&A, but just a moment to acknowledge the tensions and anxieties looming)
2. Liturgy for Justice:

Leader: O God, we pray for this broken world that is thirsty for your justice;

**All: That grace and reconciliation would eliminate all forms of oppression.**

Leader: Lord Christ, we pray for those who suffer from the weight of incarceration;

**All: That the wounded may be healed; that the broken may be made whole; that the troubled may find peace.**

Leader: Holy Spirit, hover over the waters of chaos, of estrangement, and of hopelessness;

**All: That the chains that bind hands and feet, hearts and minds, habits and laws would be shattered and surrendered to you.**

Leaders: Teach us how to be your witnesses;

**All: That we may be instruments of your peace and your justice. Amen.**

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SESSION #2: CORRECTION OR CORRUPTION?

Goal for the session:

This session will evaluate the causes and effects of the current system of criminal justice in the United States, posing the question, “Is the system the result of failed policies or the intentional outcome of profiteers and opportunists?” Attention will be placed on the Christian response to injustice and exploitation.

Preparation for the session:

1. Secure enough copies of the Participant Folder for each new attendee. Review last week’s material so you can provide an adequate summary for newcomers.
2. Spend time evaluating last week’s session. What went well? What could be improved? How might you encourage deeper engagement with the material?
3. Prepare all of the materials for the “Chains Become Bars” activity, the steps and resources for which are included below.
4. Review the “Resources for Deeper Engagement” listed at the end of the session in the Participant Folder:

***Responses from Religious Communities to Prison Profiteering***

United Methodist Church:

[www.umc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=IwL4KnN1LtH&b=5259669&ct=11576217](http://www.umc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=IwL4KnN1LtH&b=5259669&ct=11576217)

Presbyterian Church USA:

[www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/acswp/pdf/abolition-of-for-profit-prisons.pdf](http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/acswp/pdf/abolition-of-for-profit-prisons.pdf)

Conference of Catholic Bishops:

[www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/criminal-justice-restorative-justice/crime-and-criminal-justice.cfm](http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/criminal-justice-restorative-justice/crime-and-criminal-justice.cfm)

Unitarian Universalist:

[www.uua.org/statements/statements/13397.shtml](http://www.uua.org/statements/statements/13397.shtml)

Friends Committee (Quaker):

[www.fcni.org/resources/newsletter/septoct11/the\\_economics\\_of\\_incarceration](http://www.fcni.org/resources/newsletter/septoct11/the_economics_of_incarceration)

Episcopal Church:

[www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts\\_resolution.pl?resolution=2000-B055](http://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution.pl?resolution=2000-B055)

***Books & Articles***

*Slavery By Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black People in America from the Civil War to World War II* (Blackmon, 2008)

“Prison Labor, Slavery & Capitalism In Historical Perspective” (Hartnett), published on the website *History Is a Weapon*: [www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/hisprislacap.html](http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/hisprislacap.html)

“Nationwide PLN Survey Examines Prison Phone Contracts, Kickbacks” (Dannenberg, 2013), published by *Prison Legal News*:

[www.prisonlegalnews.org/23083\\_displayArticle.aspx](http://www.prisonlegalnews.org/23083_displayArticle.aspx)

“The War on Drugs: How President Nixon Tied Addiction to Crime” (Dufton, 2012), published by The Atlantic: [www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2012/03/the-war-on-drugs-how-president-nixon-tied-addiction-to-crime/254319](http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2012/03/the-war-on-drugs-how-president-nixon-tied-addiction-to-crime/254319)

*The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (Alexander, 2010)

***Websites***

The National Religious Campaign Against Torture: [www.nrcaat.org](http://www.nrcaat.org)

The American Friends Service Committee: [www.afsc.org](http://www.afsc.org)

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Grassroots Leadership: [www.grassrootsleadership.org](http://www.grassrootsleadership.org)

Between the Bars: Human Stories from Prison: [www.betweenthebars.org](http://www.betweenthebars.org)

Prison Legal News: [www.prisonlegalnews.org](http://www.prisonlegalnews.org)

Beyond Bars: [www.beyondbars.org](http://www.beyondbars.org)

The American Civil Liberties Union: [www.aclu.org](http://www.aclu.org)

Media Action Grassroots Network: [www.mag-net.org](http://www.mag-net.org)

#### ***Films/Video Clips***

*The House I Live In* (full length documentary)

“Prison Profiteers – CCA” (3:02 video): [www.beyondbars.org/pp\\_cca](http://www.beyondbars.org/pp_cca)

“Prison Profiteers – The Geo Group” (2:39 video): [www.beyondbars.org/pp\\_the\\_geo\\_group](http://www.beyondbars.org/pp_the_geo_group)

“Prison Profiteers – Law Enforcement” (2:48 video):

[www.beyondbars.org/pp\\_law\\_enforcement](http://www.beyondbars.org/pp_law_enforcement)

“Prison Profiteers – Corizon” (2:58 video): [www.beyondbars.org/pp\\_corizon](http://www.beyondbars.org/pp_corizon)

#### Teaching Tips:

1. Take another deep breath. Regardless of the outcome of the previous session, there is bound to be variance in how people respond to this material. It will be important to remember the learning curve that every person experiences when engaging these contentious topics. Also, easy solutions are not readily present, nor are they necessarily desirable. For some, this educational experience will be immediately edifying; for others, this investigation will be frightening or even threatening. Consider yourself a facilitator and a caregiver in this hour of exploration.
2. Just as last session, take time to prepare, but do not feel pressure to have ready answers to the questions that arise. Encourage and validate questions, and direct individuals or groups to chase their inquiries using the resource list provided in their folders.
3. If time constraints disallow the full completion of this session, feel free to encourage participants to complete the “Read and Discuss” section on their own time. Try to monitor the clock during the activity and the discussion so as to allow adequate time for each section, but adjust according to the class needs.



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SESSION #2: CORRECTION OR CORRUPTION?

**Intro (7 minutes)**

1. Make sure every attendee has a Participant Folder and a writing utensil.
2. Provide a brief moment for personal introductions for the sake of any newcomers.
3. Review the content of the previous session: Rethinking Criminal Justice:
  - a. Ask for participants to recap the notable statistics.
  - b. Review main points of the class discussion.
4. Just as last session, explain that issues of social justice and faith are often contentious and divisive, and cast a vision for a challenging, yet fruitful time of study and reflection. Also be sure to prepare the group for a potentially challenging topic:
  - a. The content of this session will primarily discuss the financial incentives of the current system of incarceration.
  - b. Much of the information covered will be dense, even contentious.

**Opening Prayer (1 min)**

God of Justice,

In humility we approach you this morning, asking that you might give us eyes to see, ears to hear, and mouths to speak your truth. As when you led Israel out of slavery into the wilderness, we ask that you give us courage to follow you through this uncertain and wearisome terrain. Grant us wisdom, discernment, and patience as we directly confront the unpleasant realities of injustice in our world. Above all, we ask for communion with one another and with you: creator and sustainer of the needy, friend of sinners, and deliverer of justice. **Amen.**

**“Chains Become Bars” Activity (20 min)**

*Prior to class:*

1. Cut out the paper strips with the historical facts on the “Chains Become Bars” document at the end of this session.
2. Using scotch tape, make a paper chain with the strips, keeping them in numerical order.
3. Arrange for a poster, chalk board, or dry erase board to be displayed at the front of class, where the strips can be reattached to form horizontal bars once they have been read aloud.

*For the activity:*

1. Describe the nature of the activity: it will be a series of historical “snap-shots” that trace the evolution of forced labor forms of capitalism, from slavery to the confinement of prisoners. The guiding questions for the activity are:
  - i. Why are there so many people locked up in the U.S.?
  - ii. If crime rates and drug addiction are not going down, why do we still enforce these failed policies?
  - iii. Who benefits from these systems, and how?
2. Invite participants to one-by-one detach a link in the chain, read the historical fact aloud, and reattach the strip as a horizontal bar.
3. Welcome participants to jot down their notes, thoughts, and questions during and after the activity.

**Discussion (15 min)**

*Have participants read the following responses by faith organizations and respond to the Discussion Questions (either individually, in small groups, or in a large group).*

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Response #1: United Methodist Church Announces Divestment Initiative

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The United Methodist General Board of Church & Society (GBCS) salutes the recent announcement of the denomination’s pension fund divestment from private-prison corporations and the establishment of a permanent screen on such investments. The agency also issued a call for all organizations and institutions of conscience to divest from the private-prison industry.

GBCS applauds the decision of the United Methodist General Board of Pension & Health Benefits (GBPHB) to divest from two of the largest private, for-profit prison entities: Corrections Corp. of America (CCA) and GEO Group. GBCS also appreciates the addition of the new investment screen to prohibit investment in companies that derive more than 10% of revenue from the management and operation of prison facilities.

GBPHB is the largest faith-based pension fund in the United States and ranks among the top 100 pension funds in the country. As a socially responsible investor, GBPHB is actively involved in shareholder advocacy, proxy voting, portfolio screening and community investing.

**Sixth investment screen**

The private-prison screen is the sixth adopted by GBPHB, guided by the United Methodist Social Principles. Other screens avoid investing in companies that derive significant revenues from gambling or the manufacture, sale or distribution of alcoholic beverages, tobacco-related products, weapons or pornography.

Attorney Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, described the United Methodist divestment and permanent screen as an “outstanding example of faith in action.” “This should become a national campaign,” she said. “No church, faith organization, or university in America should be investing in or profiting from prisons.”

Private prisons are a booming business that emphasizes incarceration in the U.S. criminal justice system, according to Bill Mefford, GBCS director of Civil & Human Rights. He said detention of undocumented immigrants has been an important ploy of the industry to fuel its profits. “While many United Methodists have been fighting to reduce the number of people incarcerated by a prison system that is the largest in the world,” Mefford said, “our denomination has been profiting by the continuing emphasis on incarceration as a means of justice, rather than on healing for victims of crime and accountability and on restoration for those accused of crime.”

**Others should divest**

Mefford said the decision by GBPHB is a tremendous testament to the direct action of United Methodists throughout the United States who sent emails and signed a petition calling for this critical step of divestment and screening. This prompted the Interagency Task Force on Immigration to bring the issue of private or for-profit prisons to GBPHB’s attention.

The GBPHB announcement is a moment to celebrate, according to Laura Markle Downton, GBCS Criminal Justice grassroots coordinator. She said, however, that work has only begun as private-prison corporations continue to yield record profits from promoting incarceration of millions of persons.

“We urge our colleagues to also divest from private prison corporations to ensure that any profit incentive for further abusive over-incarceration of our sisters and brothers be eliminated worldwide,” Downton said.

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### SESSION #2: CORRECTION OR CORRUPTION?

#### Response #2: Presbyterian Church (USA) Statement for the Abolition of For-Profit Private Prisons

Our church is called to raise her prophetic voice to demand justice on behalf of our sisters and brothers, children of God, who are incarcerated. The composition of the population of our prisons should raise an alarm for anyone called upon to speak for the oppressed. We are called not merely to offer our forgiveness to those who have traveled a road of oppression, deprivation and racism while we were busy maintaining our own security but to ask for God's forgiveness and theirs for our complicity in what our criminal justice system has become.

Presbyterian policy has opposed prisons in general as the primary means of addressing criminal behavior since 1972. Not only have we been collectively guilty in not addressing these problems, but also trends of social injustice and punishment over rehabilitation have significantly worsened in the last thirty years.

Christ calls us to turn a critical eye to a system that is at least partly responsible for the social, political, economic, moral, and spiritual conditions that make some of our members weak, threatened, helpless, sick, and tempted to antisocial behavior. It is the very society in which we live and which we have helped establish that creates the poor, weak, and oppressed whom God calls us to serve. We fail these members of our community when we let our governments assign prisoners to for-profit private prisons and only provide needed services and treatment programs after a person has committed a crime and is incarcerated.

The for-profit private prison corporations are substantially outside the scope of governmental regulation and control. They exploit the most vulnerable members of society. They isolate and make invisible the people they lock up. For-profit private prisons are a moral evil, which on a religious as well as an ethical basis cannot continue to exist. When we allow our governments to hire private corporations to run our prisons as if they were for-profit businesses and nothing else, we are abdicating our responsibility.

We have had policy on criminal justice issues by our church throughout its history, yet many of us ignore the need for reconciliation and have abandoned these children of God—first to a punitive government and now to a for-profit industry where they are seen not as human beings worthy of respect but as commodities from which to profit. The church must cry out in opposition to these exploitative, isolating, and unaccountable practices while joining with others in our midst that are proclaiming a vision where restorative not punitive justice allows us to more closely emulate God's justice and God's kingdom.

#### Discussion Questions

1. Compare and contrast these two approaches/statements against for-profit prisons.
2. What other ideas can you think of that can expand this type of work? What questions linger for you regarding these ideas?

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**Closing (5-10 min)**

1. Offer a time for participants to voice questions and concerns. (This is not a Q&A, but just a moment to acknowledge the tensions and anxieties looming)

2. Responsive Reading of Psalm 10:

Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

**In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor—let them be caught in the schemes they have devised.**

For the wicked boast of the desires of their heart, those greedy for gain curse and renounce the Lord.

**In the pride of their countenance the wicked say, ‘God will not seek it out’; all their thoughts are, ‘There is no God.’**

Their ways prosper at all times; your judgments are on high, out of their sight; as for their foes, they scoff at them.

**They think in their heart, ‘We shall not be moved; throughout all generations we shall not meet adversity.’**

Their mouths are filled with cursing and deceit and oppression; under their tongues are mischief and iniquity.

**They sit in ambush in the villages; in hiding-places they murder the innocent. Their eyes stealthily watch for the helpless;**

They lurk in secret like a lion in its covert; they lurk that they may seize the poor; they seize the poor and drag them off in their net.

**They stoop, they crouch, and the helpless fall by their might.**

They think in their heart, ‘God has forgotten, he has hidden his face, he will never see it.’

**Rise up, O Lord; O God, lift up your hand; do not forget the oppressed.**

Why do the wicked renounce God, and say in their hearts, ‘You will not call us to account’?

**But you do see! Indeed you note trouble and grief, that you may take it into your hands; the helpless commit themselves to you; you have been the helper of the orphan.**

Break the arm of the wicked and evildoers; seek out their wickedness until you find none.

**The Lord is king for ever and ever; the nations shall perish from his land.**

O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek; you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear

**to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed, so that those from earth may strike terror no more. Amen.**

1 The same year slavery was abolished through the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, “Black Codes” were passed in Southern states that restricted blacks from testifying against whites, from serving on juries, and from voting. Additionally, it enabled the arrest and forced labor of freed blacks through denying their right to refuse labor contracts with local plantations.

2 In 1866, the same year the Black Codes were repealed through the first Civil Rights Act, the first official convict leasing program began in Alabama, selling 374 state prisoners to a railroad company. This same year, Texas and Louisiana also initiated convict leasing to railroad companies. Arkansas followed suit the following year, and Georgia the year after.

3 Because there were absolutely no penalties for mistreating or killing convict laborers after the Civil War, in the first two years that Alabama leased its prisoners, nearly 20 percent of them died. In the following year, mortality rose to 35 percent. In the fourth year, nearly 45 percent were killed.

4 Many of the Southern strategies of profiting from prison labor were adopted from the practices of Northern states who had become well accustomed to exploiting convict labor in their industrialist projects. Northern entrepreneurs in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century continued to prefer a captive workforce over the immigrants and working class laborers who were beginning to unionize.

5 Convict leasing, especially in the South, continued into the 1930s and 1940s. For instance, by the late 1930s, one in every nineteen Black men over the age of 12 years old in Alabama was still caught in some form of involuntary servitude.

6 By the 1950s and 1960s, the “white flight” to suburbs through racially discriminatory mortgages, and the shift in location for major industries had begun to ravage the innermost places of U.S. cities. In response to public outcry to address the conditions of poverty that were causing increases in violent crime and rampant drug addiction, President Nixon launched the first war on crime, where drug users were the principle law-breakers responsible for the moral collapses of society.

7 Nixon’s “tough on crime” approach was mimicked by nearly every president and state politician since 1971. As the definition of punishable crimes expanded, the demand for prisons and prison-related services also rose. Between 1979 and 1990, state spending on prison construction increased by 612%.

## CHAINS BECOME BARS

8 While the government continues to reduce spending on education, housing, health care, and infrastructural necessities, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency estimates that over the next ten years state and federal expenditures on prisons will amount to \$351 billion. Much of this money will be channeled directly to the private sector, where business is booming.

9 Space Master Enterprises Incorporated, specializing in building pre-fabricated prison cells, witnessed a 500% profit-growth from 1982 to 1989.

10 Adtech Incorporated, with its three subsidiary corporations Correctional Development Corporation, American Detention Services Incorporated, and Steel Door Industries, saw its profits more than double from \$10.3 million to \$21.6 million in just two years from 1987 to 1989.

11 Prison food providers are witnessing unprecedented prosperity, raking in over \$1 billion yearly in this service alone. Szabo Correctional Services, a prison food provider, recently boasted a 425% profit-growth in just the last 5 years. Campbell Soup recently celebrated the fact that “the nation’s prison system is the fastest growing food service market.”

12 UNICOR, the Federal Bureau of Prisons’ manufacturing consortium, receives \$250 million of annual sales and pays inmate laborers entry-level wages of 23 cents an hour. Most of this labor benefits the Department of Defense in the form of revenue and/or the production of military weaponry.

13 Corrections Corporation of America, the nation’s largest private prison company, made \$1.7 billion last year alone. CCA manages facilities with over 90,000 prison beds in 20 states (including New Jersey). Because they are paid in hotel-like fashion (per day, per prisoner), their contracts include “lockup quotas” that require states to keep the facilities 80-100% full.

14 Prison phone companies are awarded exclusive contracts based on the kickbacks they offer to state contracting agencies. Aside from the activation fees for prepaid accounts, these businesses charge prisoners and their families per minute and often an additional connection fee to maintain contact. A 15-minute phone call, depending on the facility, might cost users up to \$14 for within-state calls or \$18 for long-distance calls.

## CHAINS BECOME BARS

*LEADER GUIDE*  
SESSION #3: A FAITHFUL RESPONSE

Goal for the session:

This session will explore the role of the community of faith in monitoring and changing the current system of mass incarceration. Attention will be given to unpacking the concept of “Christian witness” in the context of prison justice, and participants will be able to ponder some practical options for their community’s ongoing involvement.

Preparation for the session:

1. Secure enough copies of the Participant Folder for each new attendee. Review last week’s material so you can provide an adequate summary for newcomers.
2. Spend time evaluating last week’s session. What went well? What could be improved? How might you encourage deeper engagement with the material?
3. Discuss with a church leader or pastor each of the options listed in the “Forming a Response” section. Based on her or his appraisal of congregational readiness and/or level of ability, some of these options may need to be revised. Discuss the various options prior to this final session so there might be some action steps following this last session.
4. Review the “Resources for Deeper Engagement” listed at the end of the session in the Participant Folder:

***Books & Articles***

*Jesus and the Powers: Conflict, Covenant, and the Hope of the Poor* (Horsley, 2011)

*The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America* (Taylor, 2001)

Marc Goodnow’s quote from “The Slaves of Turpentine: A First Hand Account of Convict Leasing,” from Prison Culture blog: [www.usprisonculture.com/blog/2011/10/19/the-slaves-of-turpentine-a-first-hand-account-of-convict-leasing/](http://www.usprisonculture.com/blog/2011/10/19/the-slaves-of-turpentine-a-first-hand-account-of-convict-leasing/)

***Websites***

The National Religious Campaign Against Torture: [www.nrcat.org](http://www.nrcat.org)

The American Friends Service Committee: [www.afsc.org](http://www.afsc.org)

Campaign to End the New Jim Crow: [www.endnewjimcrow.org](http://www.endnewjimcrow.org)

New Jersey Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement: [www.njcaic.org](http://www.njcaic.org)

Healing Communities: [www.healingcommunitiesusa.org](http://www.healingcommunitiesusa.org)

Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference: [www.sdpcconference.info](http://www.sdpcconference.info)

***Films/Video Clips***

*Redemption of the Prosecutor* (short film): [www.redemptionoftheprosecutor.org](http://www.redemptionoftheprosecutor.org)

Teaching Tips:

1. Prepare your mind and spirit in the same fashion as the last two sessions. Breathe deeply, and rest assured that your role as a facilitator of discussion is sufficient for prompting action that will be appropriate to this community.
2. Just as last session, take time to prepare, but do not feel pressure to have ready answers to the questions that arise. Encourage and validate questions, and direct individuals or groups to chase their inquiries using the resource list provided in their folders.
3. If time constraints disallow the full completion of this session, feel free to encourage participants to complete the “Read and Discuss” section on their own time. Try to monitor the clock during the activity and the discussion so as to allow adequate time for each section, but adjust according to the class needs.

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SESSION #3: A FAITHFUL RESPONSE

**Intro (7 minutes)**

1. Make sure every attendee has a Participant Folder and a writing utensil.
2. Provide a brief moment for personal introductions for the sake of any newcomers.
3. Review the content of the previous sessions: Correction or Corruption:
  - a. Ask for participants to recall any noteworthy observations from the Chains Become Bars activity.
  - b. Review main points of the class discussion.
4. Just as before, explain that issues of social justice and faith are often contentious and divisive, and cast a vision for a challenging, yet fruitful time of study and reflection. Participants will get a chance by the end of this session to begin strategizing action steps.

**Opening Prayer (1 min)**

God of Grace and Giver of all good things,

We pause before this our final session, thankful for minds that can grow, for hearts that can soften, for mouths that can speak truth, and for bodies that can respond to the needs of this world. We are grateful for this community that is your earthly body. We want to be witnesses to your resurrection, to announce and embody a new way of living in the world. We welcome your Spirit here in this place to challenge us, to inspire us, and to move us to action. We pray this through the power of your Son, the Christ, through whom we have been forgiven and set free, **Amen.**

**Discussion (20 min)**

*Have participants read “Reclaiming Christian Witness” and respond to the Discussion Questions (either individually, in small groups, or in a large group).*

Reclaiming Christian Witness

*By J. Amos Caley*

As a young man, I grew up in a faith tradition that emphasized the importance of being a “witness” for God. What this meant, in my understanding, was that I should always be on the lookout for ways to convince my friends and acquaintances that Christianity was the true religion that offered the only way to heaven as well as the most moral lifestyle. Essentially, I saw my role as a *witness* to be a sort of salesperson for Jesus: marketing him to the masses as if he was a deep-cleanser for the conscience or an afterlife fire insurance policy. When it came to political, social, and economic issues I had very little to say, and I often shirked any suggestion that there could be a “social obligation” at the heart of the Gospel. Witnessing meant, for me, proselytizing, not putting myself in these situations where I might... well, *witness* certain things. Recently, and after several years of frustration—even rejection—of these “Christian” concepts, I’ve come back to this word *witness*, and it has changed and enriched my understanding of what it means to be a Christian witness in the world, and in the United States specifically.

Studying more closely the words in scripture, I learned that all references to “witness” in the New Testament used some version of the Greek word *μαρτυροω*, or “martyr.” A martyr, at least in contemporary terms, is someone who dies proclaiming or defending a cause. So if I’m to be a witness for God, I wondered, does this mean that I have to find a way to die for God? A little perplexed, I dug deeper.



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The historical setting for the gospels in our New Testament is first century Palestine. According to historians of Christianity and Judaism, the political and economic climate of this region was thoroughly saturated with imperial violence, intimidation, and exploitation. The dynasty of Herod and his sons, eager to show tribute and loyalty to the Roman Empire who had them installed, ruled over Judea and Samaria with an iron fist and gold purse. Leveling heavy taxes on the poor, bribing elites with cultural and social capital, authorizing massive building projects (many of which to honor Herod and the Romans), and violently crushing those who opposed him, the reign of Herod signaled a prolonged era of state-sponsored terrorism and cultural genocide for the Jewish people.

It is no wonder why the idea of “witness” or “martyrdom” took on so much power during this time. Jewish peasants and religious leaders organized and orchestrated a number of public protests against Roman and Herodian power. In one instance, a group of teachers and students climbed up to the top of the temple during the midday bustle, publicly tearing down the golden eagle of Rome that Herod had placed there. In response to this, Herod had them burned alive. When the crowds responded with a rally at the Passover festival, Herod’s guards massacred thousands of Jewish protesters. In another story, Jewish religious teachers staged a mass protest urging the Jewish people to refuse to pay taxes to Caesar. This time, it was the elite high priests bribed by Herod that put pressure on the demonstrators and quenched the resistance. In Galilee, around 1 B.C.E., Roman armies brutally ended a three-year peasant revolt by crucifying thousands of rebels on the main roads leading to Jerusalem—a “shock and awe” campaign against Galilean dissenters.

Why is this history important? Jesus, the presence of God among us, entered a world of political turmoil and upheaval. And specifically Jesus came as a Jewish rabbi of a peasant class in a dangerous and economically ravaged region. We are told that he stood in solidarity with the defenseless, that he healed the sick and the tormented, that he fed the hungry, and that he saw and publicly recognized those rendered invisible or unworthy. In other words, he became a witness. We read that he spoke about God using politically and economically relevant metaphors—fields and famines, tax collectors and interest rates, kings and servants—and that he cast a vision for a *new* life, a *new* kingdom, and a *new* (renewed) covenant with the God of Israel, not the god of Rome. In other words, he became a witness. The gospel writers tell us that after a public ministry, which ended in a public demonstration during a politically tumultuous festival (Passover), he was condemned, tortured, and executed in public, as a failed king. In other words, he became a witness. And after his resurrection, just before he ascended into heaven, we are told that Jesus’ final words to his disciples are: “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Jesus, like Elijah to Elisha, offers his followers the mantle of prophetic public witness.

In a time when we tend to completely separate religion and politics into airtight compartments, worshiping God while leaving oppressive power structures unaddressed, I believe that recovery of the word *witness* is central to embracing the type of life to which God calls us in the story of Jesus. This revolutionary message of Divine love invites us to render visible the hidden injustices of state-sponsored violence and abject poverty. It calls us not only to see and recognize oppression, but also to publicly name and condemn the policies and practices that

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reinforce it. The Gospel beckons us to not only protest, but also to creatively devise strategies against this dehumanization as we celebrate the dignity of each man, woman, and child as unique image-bearers of God. To be a witness means to confront the exploitive and destructive system of mass incarceration in the United States and to ceaselessly work in the power of God's Spirit to end it.

In 1914, nearly one hundred years ago, a reporter for The Continent newspaper, Marc N. Goodnow, visited a convict work camp in Florida and wrote of the political and economic exploitation he encountered there. When I read his words, I heard them as if straight from the mouth of Jesus in the first-century ghetto of Galilee. Horrified, Goodnow wrote:

*The fact that this inhuman system has been allowed to flourish not only in Alabama and other States for so long is all the more reason why the church – some church at least – should attempt some systematic mission work. When society exiled these creatures... it forgot that these men would one day reenter society. The question is: 'What kind of men will they be?' There may be no complete regeneration ahead of these men, at least not while they are so utterly neglected by civilizing influences, but how immeasurably their mental, moral, and spiritual outlook could be improved by the kindly, human, sympathetic influence of the church? Where is the church that will accept this mission?*

Discussion Questions

1. What do you believe about the role of a person's faith in their public life? Has this belief changed over time?
2. What thoughts, concerns, or questions emerge from reading about this "reclaiming of Christian witness?"

*At the culmination of this discussion, ask participants to share some of their responses. Try to segue into discussions on what "witness" might look like in the local and immediate context.*

**Forming a Response (15-20 min)**

*Go over the list of options under the Response form, explaining and clarifying if necessary. Provide participants 5 minutes to consider their responses and fill out their form. Begin a discussion when participants are finished, encouraging creativity and, if possible, outlining a strategy for moving forward. Make sure to collect names and contact information for each interested participant.*

*\*Be sure to follow up with a church leader promptly on the ideas discussed in this final session\**

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**Closing Liturgy (2 min)**

Leader: Lord, make us instruments of your peace.

**All: Where there is hatred, let us sow love**

Leader: Lord, make us instruments of your grace.

**All: Where there is injury, teach us how to heal and to forgive.**

Leader: Lord, make us instruments of your righteousness.

**All: Where there is injustice, help us to see and to respond faithfully.**

Leader: Lord, make us instruments of your hope.

**All: Where there is despair, show us how to comfort and to cultivate.**

Leader: Lord, make us into your witnesses.

**All: That we might see the invisible, that we might speak truth, and that we might believe in impossible things.**

Leader: We ask these things in your power, and for your glory.

**All: Both here in this place and to the ends of the earth. Both now and forevermore. Amen.**