



SEEKING JUSTICE THROUGH SENTENCING REFORM

BY POLLY HOUSE

GOD USES STRONG VERBS in Micah 6:8 to talk about what is required of the faithful:

DO justice, LOVE mercy and WALK humbly.

The United Methodist General Board of Church and Society exists to help United Methodists know how to do that. When it comes to working for laws that align with church teaching found in the Social Principles, staff not only seek justice, they bring others to walk with them.

Kara Gotsch, Church and Society's director of advocacy with the Interfaith Criminal Justice Coalition, worked with clergy in Iowa to make inroads toward the creation of United States Senate Resolution 2123 on prison sentencing reform.

Sponsored by Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa), this bill permits a court to reduce the mandatory minimum prison term imposed on certain non-violent drug defendants and youth who committed their offense before they were 18 years old.

It expands "safety valve" eligibility to permit a federal court to impose a sentence below the mandatory minimum for non-violent, cooperative drug defendants with a limited criminal history.

The bill also provides incentives for prisoner rehabilitation in federal institutions by allotting time credits to inmates who successfully complete recidivism-reducing programs. Prisoners can use the time credits to transition earlier to a community corrections facility or home confinement.

"The bill is consistent with what we believe as United Methodists," said the Rev. Abraham Funchess, pastor of Jubilee United Methodist Church in Waterloo, Iowa. "We believe the mandatory minimums are unfair, especially as they apply to black and brown people. In the two-party system, there are many who want to be hard on crime, but being hard doesn't have to mean unfair. We had to get the point across that it's expensive to incarcerate people. It's detrimental to families. It destroys homes and has a greatly negative impact on children."

"Criminal justice reform is my passion," Gotsch said. "It's been my career. Working on this advocacy effort for sentencing reform has been great because of the people on the ground. They are wonderful to work with because they understand in their hearts and souls that regardless of their circumstances, everyone needs to be treated fairly."

COLLECTIVE VOICES ARE EFFECTIVE

Gotsch and other staff helped a group of 130 clergy in Iowa to draft a letter to send to Grassley, telling him why they believed this bill was important and asking for his support. The letter drew media attention.

When an Iowa radio station learned about it, a reporter interviewed Grassley and asked him about the letter and why he opposed sentencing reform.

Iowa Bishop Julius Trimble joined a Roman Catholic and an Episcopal bishop

– all of whom signed the letter – in writing an op-ed piece in the Des Moines Register asking Grassley to let the bill come before committee. Grassley wrote a counterpoint piece addressing their arguments and saying why he thought it was a bad idea. The Register published another editorial piece telling Grassley he needed to change his mind.

Funchess said he "considered it a privilege to have my name attached to the letter. I believe the collective voice of so many ministers from across the state of Iowa made Sen. Grassley reconsider his stand on sentencing reform."

The Rev. Lee Schott, another signer who leads a congregation inside the Iowa Correctional Institution for Women, agreed.

"I think it really mattered to Grassley that 130 ministers signed this letter asking for him to present this bill on sentencing reform," she said. "Ministers influence a lot of people, and that means something to a politician."

Schott said she heard that Grassley carried the signed letter in his pocket and showed it to other people telling them "these people want me to do something."

Funchess also credits the Church and Society staff – and Gotsch in particular – with securing a meeting with Grassley's staff for the clergy group. That meeting was key, he said.

"We knew the senator's staff, even his right hand people, did not speak for the senator," he said. "We also knew even



COURTESY PHOTO

The Rev. Abraham Funchess



SHARI MILLER PHOTOGRAPHY

The Rev. Lee Schott

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though they agreed to meet with us, they might not be open to some of our interests. But shortly after, Sen. Grassley began to relent on his stance on prison sentencing reform. I know he goes to church about 15 minutes from my church. He is a man of faith, so we appealed to his Christianity and his humanity."

Several weeks after this meeting, Funchess talked directly with Grassley by phone and asked him to make a concentrated effort to get the bill on the floor for a vote.

The Iowa clergy had another call with Grassley, again telling him why it was important. He asked them hard questions. "They had a really important conversation," Gotsch said.

"Grassley had seven bipartisan people look at the bill again and they came out with a compromise bill in October 2015," she said. "The bill passed in committee and now we hope to get a vote in the next month or so. The House also introduced a similar bill."

"For Grassley to see the light and acknowledge the status quo needed to be changed was huge," Schott notes, "Grassley's bill has bipartisan support, so there is no conservative or liberal agenda."

Funchess is hopeful the bill will soon get a hearing, but he said, "I understand now, though, that there is a bump because of the death of [Supreme Court Justice Antonin] Scalia. We will just have to be patient."

TAKING THE NEXT STEPS

What can other United Methodists do to support passage of the bill?

"I would encourage people to call Sen. Grassley's office and let him know they stand in solidarity with the Iowa ministerial alliance," Funchess said. "Call your particular congressional representatives and senators. Call the Senate Judiciary Committee specifically. Our elected

representatives pay attention when groups of people come together. My best advice is make that call and tell them why you believe in this bill. Tell them your story or the story of someone you know."

Polly House is a freelance writer based in Nashville, Tennessee.

Ministry with prisoners

THE REV. LEE SCHOTT IS AN IOWA CLERGYWOMAN WHO LEADS

the Women at the Well Church inside the Iowa Correctional Institution for Women in Mitchellville.

In the prison, Schott sees women from non-violent offenders to murderers.

"About 60 percent of the women here deal with mental illness; 80 percent deal with addiction; 90 percent are survivors of abuse," she said. "Many of the women are dealing with all three; there's a lot of overlap. When you talk about addiction, a lot of the women are here because of non-violent drug crimes. Even some of the ones here because of financial

crime are here because their crimes were drug-related."

She said many of the women in the prison are there because of non-violent offenses, and society probably doesn't benefit from their incarceration. Many would probably be more useful at home with their families.

Schott says the Social Principles have influenced her ministry, as well as the ministry of The United Methodist Church in general. "The Social Principles have to do with human dignity. When I minister inside the prison, I feel that."

Schott was appointed to lead the prison church after a series of conversations with Iowa

Bishop Julius Trimble. "He understood he couldn't just appoint someone to this church. I had to want to be here. I guess I'm one of only two ministers who ever got sent to prison by her bishop!

"I know in planting this congregation in prison, it was reflecting the church's values. John Wesley had a strong commitment to ministry to prisoners. Prison ministries often come from the more evangelical tradition, but I believe The United Methodist Church is well-positioned to occupy that space in ministry."

Polly House