

70Times7 Initiative

The 70Times7 Initiative: Louisiana Interchurch Conference Fall Board Meeting Report

September 2018

With generous funding from the Wilson Foundation, the Louisiana Interchurch Conference launched the 70Times7 Initiative as a pilot program in January 2018 to increase awareness and encourage advocacy regarding criminal justice reform among members of local congregations. More specifically, the Initiative focuses on fostering a better public understanding of people convicted of violent crimes and sex offenses in the hopes that these individuals will be included in future criminal justice reform efforts.

Over the eight months of the 70Times7 Initiative, we have had 23 participants in our five in-person learning sessions in Baton Rouge, including: 5 pastors, 8 congregants, and 4 public officials. These learning sessions introduced both pastors and congregants to people with direct experience with violent crimes and sex offenses, including a public defender, a former prosecutor, a victim's rights advocate, a counselor who has worked with both victims of sexual assault and people convicted of sex offenses, and most especially formerly incarcerated people convicted of either violent crimes or sex offenses.

From our participants, we have formed a core group of 7 developing advocates from four different congregations. Two have already become active advocates, attending the Louisianans for Prison Alternatives rally at the capitol, writing letters in favor of restoring voting rights, setting up meetings with their legislators, and pledging to participate in an upcoming ballot initiative to abolish Louisiana's non-unanimous jury verdict. Five are in the process of setting up meetings with their legislators. All have agreed to present what they have learned to a broader portion of their congregation, whether through a sermon, a Sunday school lesson, or a series of after-service discussions. All have also committed to drafting a petition in favor of better funding for state public defenders and encouraging fellow congregants to sign, creating new advocates as they engage in advocacy themselves.

70Times7 coordinator Dr. Stephanie Gaskill is also taking part in nascent conversations among criminal justice reform advocates about how to bridge the divides, both real and imagined, between our perspectives and those of crime victims and survivors. One proposal is a narrative project in which representatives of both groups (which are obviously overlapping) write what they want to know from, and what they want to be known by, the other.

Finally, to increase engagement with the 70Times7 web site, we are asking that each attendee at the LIC's Fall Board Meeting read and leave a comment on at least one learning session segment or legislative update before the end of the meeting. Your feedback is greatly appreciated.

Report by Dr. Stephanie Gaskill, 70Times7 Program Coordinator

<https://www.70times7.us/>