



## A Declaration of the Louisiana Interchurch Conference (LIC) Board of Directors for Comprehensive Criminal Justice Reform Fall 2016

As religious leaders of the state of Louisiana, we believe in a world where all people regardless of the crimes of their past, their race, and their economic status, have access to fair and equitable treatment in a criminal justice system committed to restoring people back to their communities. In contrast, we see in our congregations every day the consequences of our state's bloated, unfair, and costly criminal justice system in the plight of broken and fractured communities. Louisiana incarcerates more of her citizens than any other state, in a country that leads the world in incarceration rates. The status quo as the Incarceration Capital of the World is morally unacceptable. Louisiana legislators must act boldly to reform a criminal justice system that is unfairly administered across racial, social, and economic lines and fails to serve the common good.

In the 2017 Louisiana Legislative Session, our state lawmakers will have the opportunity to pass much needed, comprehensive criminal justice reform legislation to reduce our state's obscenely high incarceration rates and then reinvest those savings into community-based re-entry and reintegration programs, fully resources mental health and substance abuse treatment services, and other proven methods to prevent crime and reduce recidivism.

As faith leaders concerned for the common good we ask our legislators to support comprehensive criminal justice reform laws and policies guided by the following principles:

**HOPE AS AN IMPERATIVE:** In his speech to Congress, Pope Francis reminded legislators that "a just and necessary punishment must never exclude the dimension of hope and the goal of rehabilitation." Our state must end life sentences – especially in the case of crimes committed by juveniles, habitual offender laws that strip judges of their discretion, the death penalty and other harsh and inhumane sentencing laws because such deny the dimension of hope to offenders and have immense human and financial costs.

**THE VIABILITY OF REDEMPTION:** Redemption is at the very heart of our faith. Since nearly all inmates will return to society, all prisons and jails in Louisiana should be places where programs are available that encourage and reward offenders for efforts to change behaviors and attitudes, and where they learn the skills and obtain the education needed for employment and life in the community.

**PRISON AS A LAST RESORT:** Prisons at their most basic level nurture shame, isolation, exposure to violence, and a reduced ability to meet one's economic needs – all known drivers of crime. Prison removes men and women from family members who depend on them and on whom they depend for love and support. Prison should only be used for the most serious of crimes, and must always have as a major goal the reform and rehabilitation of offenders.

**RESPECT FOR THE DIGNITY AND SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE:** Every human being is a child of God, made in God's image and likeness. The death penalty violates the dignity and sanctity of human life. It is premised on retribution not redemption. Its application is highly prone to errors and is biased by race, the quality of legal representation, and location of the crime. It absorbs much needed resources that would be better used to prevent crime and increase public safety. There are alternatives that both



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punish criminals and protect society. We pray that our legislators will end the death penalty in Louisiana, which diminishes all of us.

At stake in the 2017 Legislative Session are critical moral questions about the kind of state we want for our children and grandchildren. We pray that our Legislators will exhibit the leadership and wisdom required to effect the transformational change needed. Change that will heal and rebuild a criminal justice system that reflect the principles outlined above and our nation's values of equal justice, accountability, and a chance to start over after missteps and misfortune.