



Mass Incarceration: Advocating for Change February 9, 2021

Dear Member of the JustFaith Network,

We are grateful that you are a part of our JustFaith community. Whether you are a graduate of one of our programs or you are just getting to know us, we hope this offering will help sustain you spiritually and equip you to work for justice.

In 2021, our bi-monthly resources will typically appear in your inbox on the second and fourth Tuesday of each month; in addition, you can access an archive of past resources by logging into your JustFaith account. You can use these resources for personal reflection or you can invite your friends, family, Sunday School class, or current or past JFM small group to join you in-person or via videoconferencing. If you are new to video conferencing, Zoom tutorials are available on our YouTube page. [Click here to access.](#)

This week's resource on mass incarceration discusses a short article, which you can find [here](#). You can forward the link to the group to read in advance (this will allow more time for discussion). Several of our programs explore the devastating effects of mass incarceration; however, **if your group is new to this subject, we recommend also reading this summary by the Equal Justice Initiative (<https://eji.org/criminal-justice-reform/>)** in preparation for your gathering.

While we hope that this twice-monthly resource will inspire and sustain your community while distancing, now is also the perfect time to start one of our [regular programs](#). Today's resource speaks to the theme of racial justice, which is highlighted in our racial justice series.

Last but not least, we can't do this without you. All of our work is a collaboration with those who support us. When you donate, your gift helps to sustain and equip individuals and communities committed to making the world better. [Click here to help out.](#)

Finally, please feel free to forward this resource to friends and family!

With gratitude,

The JustFaith Ministries Staff



Welcome and Opening Prayer (5 minutes)

When everyone has dialed in, find three readers to help read the opening prayer. Share your screen so that everyone can read the prayer.

Begin your time together with these or similar words:

Welcome, friends! It's so good to be with all of you, despite that we can't be together in person. Today we'll begin with prayer and spend a few minutes checking in with each other. Then we'll have some conversation around a short reflection before closing in prayer. Most importantly, though, this will be a time to care for one another and to be the community we're called to be.

Let's take a few seconds of silence to pause, to listen to our breathing, and to be present in this space.

Pause for 30 seconds before beginning the opening prayer.

Facilitator: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. - John 1:1 NRSV*

Reader 1: How do we begin, Lord of all things new?

Reader 2: How do we begin to build a new world,

Reader 3: new relationships,

Reader 1: new understandings?

Pause.

Reader 1: How do we start over and build a community of acceptance,

Reader 2: a world of diversity,

Reader 3: a family of trust?

Pause.

Reader 1: Shall we begin with confession, with lament and sorrow?

Reader 2: Of course, we have, and we will continue to confess our deepest sin of hatred and division. Until all among us realize how divided we are, how unjust we are, how broken we all are.

Pause.

Reader 3: But surely there are beginnings to be made,

Reader 1: words to be spoken,



Reader 2: work to be done.

Pause.

Reader 3: Surely there are ways to see with new eyes,
brothers and sisters,
who are different and yet the same.

Reader 1: How do we begin, God of second chances?

All: Let it begin with me. Amen.

— Derek C. Weber, January 2021
umcdiscipleship.org

Check-In Time (10 minutes or so)

Ask these open-ended questions. If you're by yourself, journal about them.

Note: If you're with a group, these questions have the potential to take up a lot of time. Some weeks may require more check-in time than others, depending on the needs of the group. To provide a shorter yet meaningful check-in time, choose ONE of the questions below, and ask participants to share a ONE sentence response.

- **Before we begin this week's reflection, let's take a few minutes to check in. How is everyone feeling?** (It will be a bit more difficult via phone to know if someone is being talked over or is trying to get a word in.... Be sure everyone has a chance to speak).
- **What is something you're struggling with this week?**
- **Where have you seen a sign of hope this week?**

Other optional questions include: What is something you've learned about yourself during this time of social distancing? Where have you experienced a "thin place" in the last week? Where have you seen beauty this week? What is one new behavior you'd like to continue doing when the virus has passed us by?



Reflection (15 minutes or so)

Introduce the day's theme with the following words:

In honor of National Criminal Justice Reform Month, today's resource seeks to give us an update on criminal justice reform policies being implemented and considered by the new administration. The hope is that it will also give us some ideas for engaging in effective action and advocacy for criminal justice reform, even though we're currently stuck in quarantine.

To get started, can you name some reasons why mass incarceration is a problem, or why it flies in the face of Christian teaching? Let's take a couple of minutes to share our thoughts either aloud or in the chat box.

Don't spend more than 5 minutes on this question.... You can wrap up the discussion by saying, "Thank you for your thoughts. We need to move on in order to get to some potential action items. Perhaps we can continue the conversation around this question another day (or through taking the JustFaith Ministries' program [Faith and Racial Justice: Changing Systems and Structures!](#))"

If participants have *NOT* already read the ACLU article ahead of the meeting, [pull it up](#) and share your screen. Ask volunteers to read the article aloud, switching readers between headings.

If participants *HAVE* already read the ACLU article, ask for volunteers to briefly summarize each of the seven items in the criminal justice to-do list.

Then say:

Inevitably, JustFaith Ministries has to write these resources well in advance of their release. There may be some items included in the list on which we have some updates. For example, on January 26th, President Biden [signed an executive order](#) to roll back significantly (but not entirely) the country's use of private prisons. Are there any updates to the ACLU article that you know of?

Then say:

In order to discern how we can take action to end mass incarceration, we will each compose a simple, two-part action plan which we will carry out *this week*. The first step of the action plan will be to research one question that came up for you as you read this article (For example, "What is the MORE Act?" or "what steps is the new administration taking – or not taking – to end private prisons?"). Let's take a moment of silent reflection to each think of a question we would be interested in



researching this week. When you are ready, type your question into the chat box and send it to the group.

Then say:

The second step of our action plan will be to take one action step this week. Does anyone have any ideas of a simple yet concrete way that you can advocate for an end to mass incarceration? As we brainstorm, let's consider *simple* ideas that we can *easily accomplish* this week. Also, while educating ourselves is always great, let's stick to suggestions that involve *action*.

If possible, open a blank document, share your screen, and jot down participants' ideas as they speak.

Additional ideas to include on the list are:

- Call or write to your representatives. Let them know that this issue matters to you. (Know that you don't have to be an expert on policy in order to talk to them – speak from your heart!) You can find out how to contact your representatives here: <https://www.usa.gov/elected-officials>
- Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper. You can find instructions here: <https://www.bread.org/library/writing-letter-editor-your-local-newspaper>
- Find out what groups in your local community are working to advocate for criminal justice reform or police accountability. Call them or email them to find out how you can be of support. (Be persistent until you hear back from someone! Many nonprofits are overwhelmed and understaffed right now, but they do appreciate community support).
- Email your priest or pastor to schedule a meeting to brainstorm about how your congregation can get involved in this issue.

Then say:

Let's take a minute of silence to choose *one* step we can commit to taking *this week*. It can be a simple step. Choose an action item that is realistic and doable for you.

Optionally, you can add: While it is tempting to say "I'll think about it and get back to you," JustFaith Ministries encourages us to make the commitment now.

Pause for 1-2 minutes.

Then invite participants to type their action steps into the chat box and to send them to the rest of the group.



Thank everyone for their commitments, and encourage the group to:

- Take a minute to write down their research question (submitted earlier in the session) and their action item.
- Send an email to the entire group later in the week, which will include: 1. A few sentences around the answer to their research question, and 2. A confirmation that they have completed their action item.

Announcements (10 minutes-ish)

- Remind participants that today's conversation offered only a brief insight into a huge topic. If they would like to take a deeper dive into this subject matter, they should consider facilitating JustFaith Ministries' [racial justice series](#).
- Let participants know that the materials for this gathering were free, put together by the JustFaith Ministries staff in order to equip more people for the work of peace and justice. In order to support the creation of more resources and programs, participants are encouraged to donate to JustFaith Ministries through justfaith.org.
- JustFaith Ministries is currently hosting a monthly webinar series called "Acting for Justice While Sheltering in Place," in which an expert on a justice-related topic will offer tips for taking action during COVID-19. On Thursday, February 18, 7:00 p.m. Eastern Time, speaker Bob Hunter will address the topic, "Black Progress and Racial Backlash." Visit the [JustFaith Ministries Facebook page](#) for more information on times and topics.
- Are there any opportunities for action or advocacy happening in your community this week? Invite participants to share ways to support the work of local groups working for justice.

Closing Prayer (10 minutes-ish)

Share your screen, so that everyone can read the closing prayer. Find two readers to help with the closing prayer. Then say:

Before we join in the closing prayer, let us pause to acknowledge the presence of the Holy Spirit, who is as close as our very breath.

Pause for 30 seconds

Let's pray.



When our minds race with fear,
when televisions blare bad news,
when information and misinformation
whirl around us,

Speak to us, O God,
in the sound that is thin and quiet.

Pause for silence.

Facilitator: "These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also." - Acts 17:6 NRSV

Reader 1: The world doesn't like change, God of transformation and growth.
Never has, from the very beginning. We want things to stay the way they are,
Or at least the way we imagine them to be.

Reader 2: Peel back the changes until we get back to . . . what?
Some imagined "greatness" that was built on oppression?
Some "innocent" time when we didn't worry about the suffering of those not
like us?

Reader 1: The world doesn't like change, God of justice and emancipation.
Never has.

Reader 2: Which is why you came among us to turn the world upside down.
Which is why your church, from the very beginning was proclaiming a new
reality
that turned all our hatreds on their heads.
Which is why the gospel was a threat, from its very inception,
to the status quo,
to the powers that be,
to the way things are.
And that gospel is still at work turning the world upside down.

Reader 1: Lord of upside-down and right-side up,
Let me be a part of that which turns the world
Upside-down.
Let me be one of those
who don't fear
kin-dom change.
Amen.



— Derek C. Weber, January 2021
umcdiscipleship.org

Then, in these words, invite any participants who have a prayer, a concern, or a request to briefly share it:

We are disciples on a journey.

We are the body of Christ, broken for the world.

We hold one another as we carry the concerns of our neighbors.

If you feel moved, please share your prayer aloud.

Leader: We pray also for the members of the JustFaith community across the country. Unite us through the power of your Holy Spirit, that together we might participate with you in the building of your Kingdom, in order to create a more just and peaceful world. Amen.