

Passion



Jeff Geary, Pastor of White Plains Presbyterian Church, reflects on the passion that has taken hold within his congregation to work on ending the racial caste system upon which the war on drugs and mass incarceration system is built. By reading, sharing in conference sponsored by Stony Point, sending hymnals and calendars to men who are incarcerated, participating in the legislative push to Raise the Age for criminal responsibility in NY to 18, and working with the Presbytery Prisoner Partnership, the Holy Spirit is moving to bear witness to human dignity. He writes:

During Lent, the White Plains Presbyterian Church studied Michelle Alexander's book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. We finished out Lenten journey with a commitment to continue our current forms of prison ministry:

- helping imprisoned adults give gifts to their children during the Christmas holidays;
- writing letters to and mailing sermons to those who are incarcerated;
- responding to specific requests, like the one we found in Hudson Happenings seeking 100 Presbyterian hymnals for the chapel at Sing Sing Correctional Facility; and
- supporting the prisoner re-entry programs with which our presbytery is involved.

But we also ended our four weeks of study with a new commitment to work for the abolition of the mass incarceration system itself – and not simply because it has become too expensive to maintain, or a political albatross, but for the purpose of ending the racial caste system upon which it has been built. We have committed

- to work for an end to the war on drugs which targets young black men and which, according to one study, accounts for *almost all* of the prison growth since 1980;
- to scrutinize our legal system, including the President's current nominee for Supreme Court Justice, on his positions on criminal justice, fourth amendment rights, and "tough on crime" policies;
- to engage in local campaigns like the one to Ban the Box on employment applications here in Westchester in order to give former felons a fair chance for a job and to have the opportunity to get further into the hiring process before a background check is conducted; and
- to look at our church's investments to make sure we are not profiting from the current system that locks up black men at a rate nearly twice that of the rest of the population.

Since then our congregation has committed to support the HRP Prison ministry with funds and passion for the next three years, sent five women to attend the Synod Re-Entry program at Stony Point, spoken about the school-to-prison pipeline, and recently hosted a press conference for the #RaiseTheAge campaign, that would raise the age of criminal responsibility to 18. We see the intersections of poverty, race and the global system that has endangered our plant. Criminal justice reform has become politically popular during this election season. We strive to understand it as faithful ministry and mission, and to see beyond what is expedient toward God's coming justice.