

**Minute on Criminal Justice Reform
Fresh Pond Monthly Meeting
New England Yearly Meeting
Of The Religious Society of Friends**

Approved in Meeting for Business December 3, 2017

It is time to take a hard look at our systems of criminal justice, in Massachusetts and our nation. Misguided policies and practices of incarceration and isolation bury people alive, rather than creating the way for a new chance at life. The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) have long worked for a more humane system of corrections, and in so doing, have introduced both problems and solutions. We are writing this document to resolve for ourselves our own actions. We also see this as a statement of our intent to the wider (Friends') community along with an invitation to join us and hold us accountable.

Quakers introduced reforms and innovations, from their involvement in the beginnings of the penitentiary system in the 18th Century to the present day. The Walnut Street Jail, built in Philadelphia in 1790, is considered the birthplace of the modern prison system. At Walnut Street, each cell block had 16 one-man cells. In the wing known as the "Penitentiary House," inmates spent all day, every day, in their cells. Felons would serve their entire sentences in isolation, not strictly-as punishment, but as an opportunity for spiritual reformation and seeking forgiveness from God. With good intention, Friends unknowingly invented solitary confinement. Auburn Prison (another Quaker innovation) gave birth to the first maximum security prison - Sing Sing, in the Hudson Valley.

William Penn and John Bellers were active in prison reform in England and the Pennsylvania colony. In the 1800s Elizabeth Fry started the Association for the Reformation of the Female Prisoners in Newgate (London) to promote rehabilitation, education and job training. In 1975 Friends worked with men incarcerated at Green Haven Prison and Dr. Bernard Lafayette, an associate of Martin Luther King, in developing the *Alternatives to Violence Project* which provided over 1,000 workshops in 103 prisons during 2016 alone.

As contemporary Quakers, it is important to us that we acknowledge our contribution to the penal culture in our nation and that we name the

injustices in the current prison system. Friends believe that each person is divinely endowed with individual and social worth and should be treated humanely, with dignity and respect, regardless of their circumstances in life, or their behaviour towards others.

Recent innovations in restorative justice have shown that alternatives to punitive justice are possible. Alternatives to incarceration, treatment for addiction and mental health, educational opportunities, and social emotional learning have all been found effective in turning lives around. Building a culture of positive growth instead of a culture of command and control is an essential step.

Every year, in Massachusetts and Federally, progressive legislation is introduced that begins to improve our broken penal system. We intend to become aware of that pending legislation and become involved as citizen activists and voters. We support comprehensive criminal justice reform in Massachusetts that will promote restorative justice, support alternatives to incarceration, reform the pretrial process, and reduce the criminalization of poverty and race.

As a community of faith we have discerned a call from God to the work of peace, justice, and reconciliation. We recall the words in Hebrew Scripture: *Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.* — *Isaiah 58:12* Some among us are called to work with people in prison. Some are called to work with our legislators to introduce criminal justice reform. Some are called to help reintegrate former prisoners into society. Others are called to offer education about our broken system. And always we strive to live in the Life and Power that takes away the occasion of violence and war. We invite you to join us in the work of repairing and restoring our communities by reforming our criminal justice system.