

Statement of Rev. Jim Ketcham
Executive Council member of NYS Council of Churches

As people of faith, we emphasize the grace and forgiveness we have been shown and give witness to renewal and restoration as they occur in our midst. We are called by our Creator to the challenging task of choosing these qualities over mere vengeance and punishment. We believe each person is created in the image of God and should be treated as such.

- We know that transformation of individuals and transformation of systems are both possible.
- We support the concepts of restorative and reparative justice. These are implicit in the very definition of “corrections.” However, when society’s emphasis remains solely on retributive justice, neither those in prison or those returning from prison are afforded the opportunity to experience redemption and transition into becoming a positive contributor to their family and community.
- The worst act in an individual’s life should not continue to forever define that individual. People grow, people change, and when such changes occur, they must be recognized. New York State has the third-largest population of people serving terms of life imprisonment in the United States with thousands of New Yorkers currently serving life sentences.
- We oppose punishment not in proportion to the crime, such as mandatory minimum sentencing, up-charges by prosecutors, coercive plea-bargaining, and technical parole violations.
- We critique systems of punishment and revenge and systems that impact people of a certain race or class unjustly. No race is more prone to crime than another, yet about 70% of incarcerated persons in NYS are of color. We submit this is not an accident or coincidence, but evidence of systemic racism which must be carefully examined and rectified.

In this spirit, we support the following legislation:

- We support the “Second Look” Act (A531 Walker, S321 Salazar) to relieve the injustice of extreme penalties imposed in the “tough on crime” and Rockefeller drug law eras.

We also support the elimination of mandatory minimum sentences (A2036A Meeks, S6471 Myrie) which can force even innocent defendants to plead guilty to avoid longer sentences.

- We support Daniel’s Law (A2210 Bronson, S2398 Brouk) and urge the full funding and rapid completion of the task force’s work.

Individuals in a mental health crisis are not well served by uniformed and armed police. They will be best served by mental health professionals and trained peers to de-escalate situations, identify services needed and connect individuals to services.

- We support the “Treatment, Not Jails” bills (S1976b Ramos, A1263b Forrest). Those struggling with addiction are not best served by prison terms. Addicts rarely receive any kind of help to address their addiction and most come out of prison or jail in a worse condition than they went in. Lack of services while incarcerated only exacerbates the problems of contraband and extortion.

New York State is spending literally billions of dollars to criminalize those with mental health issues and addictions. We are doing the same thing over and over again, and yet we expect different results. This is not only a waste of taxpayer money, but, as Einstein is reported to have said, the very definition of insanity.

- We support the “No Slavery in New York Act” (S225 Myrie). We object to prisoners being forced to carry out manual labor for merely token compensation; manual labor that never provides skills that could help in a job search later. Incarcerated persons are being used and abused to increase the profit margins of corporations and to artificially lower state costs.

- We support the Fair and Timely Parole bill (S307 Salazar, A162 Weprin) and the Elderly Parole bill (S2423 Hoylman-Sigal, A2035 Davila). Both bills would increase the transparency of parole, clarify requirements and recognize that incarcerated individuals can improve themselves and holding them for decades longer serves no purpose.
- We do **not** support any efforts to roll back the Raise the Age Law and instead look for ways to improve support and justice (including not prosecuting and incarcerating youth) within the existing legal framework. New York State should be providing services to juveniles, not sentences.