

Justice & Advocacy



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Justice & Advocacy Committee
The Lehigh Conference of Churches

An occasional newsletter for our Lehigh Valley church congregations

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What justice and/or advocacy issues has your church worked on lately? We'd love to feature your story!

Justice & Advocacy News
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<http://ja.pppjr.org>

A Call from Matthew 25: "I was in prison ..."

"I was in prison and you visited me."

– Matthew 25:36

Jesus challenged his followers to provide food for hungry people and clothes for the naked, welcome strangers, and visit people who are sick or in prison (Matt. 25:31-46). Most of our congregations have people who donate food and clothing and visit people who are sick. Many churches also assist with homeless sheltering programs or refugee resettlement, but very few visit people in jail or prison. Even those of us who are called to jury duty rarely visit people who are incarcerated or see the conditions in which they live.

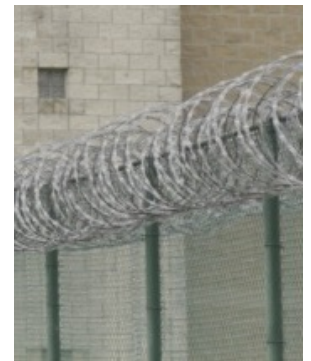
Sheila Clever's report (below) raises some disturbing questions about our prisons which are too often debilitating for people who have experienced repeated trauma, rather than places of rehabilitation and restoration.

When I Was in Prison - Did You Visit Me?

by Sheila Clever, Peace & Justice Team
First Presbyterian Church of Allentown

Prison is a form of violence - against the poor, those that are not white, the mentally challenged, migrants fleeing violence - preventing us from caring for all of humanity.

In 2013, the Justice and Advocacy Committee brainstormed the question "What causes violence?" We looked at what the Conference of Churches does – seeking to end homelessness, making housing affordable for everyone, ending hunger, ending poverty – and determined that violence is involved in all these things.



When we asked, "What are some of the aspects of violence in these things?" we answered by discovering that housing vouchers are not available to those who have been in prison, food stamps are not available to those who have been in prison, jobs are not available to those who have been in prison, and, as a result, many of those who have been in prison are homeless. As a society, we have created structures that continue to punish those who come out of prison after they have already "served their time."

But what about going to prison in the first place?

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When I Was in Prison ... (continued from page 1)

Many know that a good lawyer can keep someone out of prison. A lawyer costs money. The poor go to prison because they are poor.

Many know that law enforcement officers target black and brown faces. Non-white people go to prison because they are not white.

When I visited the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections in Harrisburg, Ulli Klemm, the Director of Religion for the PA prison system, told us that about 40% of those in prison have a mental, learning, or physical disability. 65% of PA prisoners are there because they have a drug addiction, and 40% are there solely on drug charges alone.

When I had a chance to listen to the Mennonite Central Committee's Director of Immigration Education, Saulo Paulo, I learned about the history of detaining asylum seekers in the U.S. and the laws constructed to prevent those fleeing violence in other countries from finding a safer place to raise their children.

For a while, *Justice and Advocacy* members were visiting Pennsylvania legislators to see if they could be convinced to reduce those going to prison, change life while in prison, and make transitioning to life outside of prison easier so the recidivism rate can go down.

These are some of the topics we addressed:

1. Change the laws that send non-violent people to prison in the first place
2. Stop charging juveniles as adults
3. Fund treatment centers for drug abuse instead of sending people to prison
4. End mandatory minimums
5. Stop locking up asylum seekers
6. Ban the Box
7. Allow the formerly incarcerated to have access to public housing, food stamps, general welfare
8. Transition people while they are still in prison to life outside of prison
9. Stop charging exorbitant fees for telephone calls
10. Stop charging exorbitant fees for underwear, socks, healthcare and selfcare items
11. End Cash Bail

What can we do to address some of these issues or find out more? Here are a few resources – but please contact Justice & Advocacy if you have questions or need help getting started; or check out the resources on our web page at <http://ja.ppj.org/issues/prison>.

Families Against Mandatory Minimums (FAMM) is one organization you can connect with. They are interested in alternatives to prison, as well as ending mandatory minimums. www.famm.org

The Juvenile Law Center has a website full of data on why juveniles should not be tried as adults. www.jlc.org

Church World Service (the “CROP Walk” organization) offers legal services to asylum seekers, specifically in central Pennsylvania. www.cwsglobal.org

Ban the Box Campaign (www.BantheBoxCampaign.org) has information on which municipalities and states have legislation on prohibiting an employer to demand a potential job seeker from revealing past criminal convictions. Pennsylvania's Clean Slate Law allows convictions for non-violent crimes to be expunged from public records.

Lazarus House, a program of the Lehigh Conference of Churches, offers affordable housing to those recently released from prison. www.lehighchurches.org. The **STRIVE** program offers loans to recently released prisoners, which they can use to fund housing. www.cor.pa.gov.

Bread for the World and other advocacy groups greatly changed the 2018 Farm Bill to prevent work requirements for receiving SNAP. Recently released prisoners have a hard time finding jobs, so this change greatly supported ex-offenders. Your advocacy can make a difference! www.bread.org

Cash Bail. When visiting the Philadelphia Detention Center, I learned that more than 90% of those detained were awaiting trial; they didn't have enough money to pay for bail. They also didn't have enough money to pay for clean underwear, T-shirts, or socks. Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) East Coast has a suggested care kit that you can pack and drop off at various locations or you can donate money for a kit. <https://mcc.org/stories/mcc-east-coast-prisoner-care-kits>. The ACLU is working to end cash bail. <https://aclupa.org/en/smart-justice-ending-cash-bail>.



Caring For Our Creation

The TREX Plastic Film Recycling Program

by Joan Carson, Lynnette Delbridge, and Elke Rockwell
Central Moravian Church

Many of us have asked ourselves, how can we do a better job caring for creation and how can we make this a communal enterprise? One environmental problem that has received much notice in recent years is plastic. It litters our landscapes, clogs our landfills, endangers our marine animals and even poses health risks to humans in the form of microplastics in the rivers that supply our drinking water. Early in 2020, Bethlehem Area Moravian (BAM) churches joined together to address the problem of plastic in our own homes and churches by partnering with TREX, a company that manufactures deck building materials, siding and outdoor furniture made from plastic-containing composite materials. The company sponsors a program called the TREX Plastic Film Recycling Challenge which engages schools and community organizations in the collection and reuse of unwanted plastic. The Company also offers a commercial program. The aim is to reduce the amount of plastic waste that goes into landfills and to contribute to the environmentally responsible use of resources.

The goal of the Challenge is to collect 500 lbs. of plastic bags and wrap (#2 and #4 plastic film) in 6 months or less.

When Central Moravian's Social Action Committee learned about the TREX Plastic Challenge in 2019 and contacted the other Bethlehem Area Moravian (BAM) churches to see whether they would be interested in joining together in this project, the response was a resounding



and immediate “yes”. Within one year, the six BAM churches - Advent, Central, College Hill, East Hills, Edgeboro and West Side - completed the Challenge. So far over 6,000 lbs. of plastic film have been collected jointly and will be recycled and reused. Each congregation made its own decision as to the color and placement of their bench. Donating the bench is also an option, as is refusing it, if there is no use for it.

The project generated an increased sense of familiarity and an expressed sense of shared purpose among those involved. There was also consensus that this task brought into sharp focus how much plastic we use day in and day out. The goal, we agreed, must go beyond recycling and reusing. We need to concentrate our efforts on finding ways to use less plastic. In the meantime, we are

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The TREX Challenge - plastic film recycling How Your Church Can Get Started

The TREX website (<https://recycle.trex.com>) provides general information on the Challenge program, a list of the community partners (drop off sites) by state, a short video explaining the program, examples of acceptable types of plastic and the possibility to register for the Community Challenge.

Prior to registering, an organization needs to identify and establish contact with a “community partner” who is willing to accept the collected plastic and truck it to the TREX Company. (Lehigh Valley “community partners” include Food Lion, Giant Food Stores, Kohl’s, Redner’s Markets, Wegmans, and Weis Markets.) Negotiating the logistics, such as the days of the week and the time of day when the store can receive the plastic, is the responsibility of the organization undertaking the Challenge. During the registration process you will need to identify the name and location of the community partner you will be collaborating with. It is helpful to get personally acquainted with the manager of the store that will accept your plastic. This makes it easier to resolve any issues that may arise.

When you are ready to start, a member of your organization needs to register at <https://recycle.trex.com>. Following submission of the electronic registration form, the registrant receives an email stating the exact duration of the Challenge period and providing the link to the <https://my.trex.com> portal for future management of all aspects of the Challenge. The site requires a user ID and password. Besides allowing the reporting of plastic weight, it lets Challenge participants edit information about their organization (such as delivery address), create a new user and request recycle bins. TREX will ship two cardboard collection bins and a poster identifying the correct types of plastic to the participant. Should you have any questions, you may contact TREX at 540-542-6930 or email: NexTrex@trex.com.

Once you have begun the Challenge, the weight of the plastic collected and delivered to the community partner needs to be reported monthly on the portal website. When the goal of 500lbs. has been reached within the designated time period, TREX automatically notifies the participant that they may choose a bench for delivery to their address free of charge. You do not have a choice regarding the style of the bench, but you do have a choice of color. This is TREX’ way of recognizing its Challenge participants. The bench is made out of the composite materials they use for their outdoor furniture.

Black History Master Class

During February (Black History Month) Masterclass is offering a free three-part (10-hour, 54 lesson) video class on “Black History, Black Freedom, Black Love.”

The series is part of a \$2 million commitment by Master-Class to “make content that inspires and educates on social justice and against systemic racism, for the first-time ever an entire class will be available to stream for free.” MasterClass is a U.S. subscription-based online education platform that offers tutorials and lectures pre-recorded by experts in various fields, such as Angela Davis and Cornel West.

The series “challenges viewers to rethink the notions of race and racism, while reconciling gaps in traditional education about U.S. history and offer tools and techniques to empower change in our own lives.”

Part I: The Past explores the ties between slavery and American capitalism; the 14th Amendment and how the law acts as an agent of white supremacy; the history of voter suppression; and equality in education.

Part II: The Present examines important topics such as the origin of critical race theory; the historic Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court case; and the legacy of Thurgood Marshall.

Part III: The Future discusses how members can take what they have learned to move forward and create a society built on justice.

• **Read about the series** in this **press release**:
<https://thestreamable.com/news/masterclass-makes-three-part-class-streaming-for-free-for-black-history-month>

• **Watch the entire series** of classes at:
<https://learn.masterclass.com/blackhistorymonth>
The class is also available for free on [IMDbTV](#) and on [PrimeVideo](#) for all U.S. Amazon. Prime members.

Caring for Our Creation *(continued from page 3)*

looking forward to continue working together on caring for our environment and fostering relationships among our congregations one step at a time.....or maybe one plastic bag at a time.

If you would like more information on the TREX Plastic Film Recycling Challenge, please contact the Central Moravian Church Office at 610-866-5661 or office@centralmoravianchurch.org.

- **Stir Up Peace - Nonviolent Direct Action**
- video series from Mennonite Mission Network (MMN)

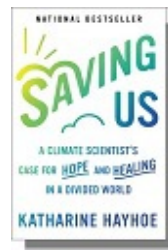
Stir Up Peace is a nine-episode educational series of short videos and study guides on how nonviolent direct action can create change. The project aims to empower congregations and individuals to address social problems nonviolently.



Nonviolent direct action is a strategic response to violence, racism, oppression and injustice. Its tactics reject physical force and the threat of violence to achieve collective goals. The series, which includes curriculum and guidance for group discussion, is free.

The series is available at mennonitemission.net/resources/peace/stir-up-peace.

- **“Saving Us: A Climate Scientist's Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World”** (Sept. 21, 2021).



Although climate change is a primary theme of this book by Katharine Hayhoe, she is particularly focused on how to dialogue effectively with people who have very different perspectives from us. In addition to her recent book “*Saving Us*,” her website www.katharinehayhoe.com/faqs/ includes many resources about the science of climate change and how to engage effectively in conversation and action with church and community groups.

- **APART: Screening and Panel Discussion**
Sunday, February 20, 2022 (7:00-9:00pm)

APART is the story of three unforgettable formerly incarcerated mothers, jailed for drug-related charges, fight to overcome alienation—and a society that labels them “felons”—to readjust to life with their families.



Register for this pre-release screening, followed by a discussion with panelists familiar with the experiences of women in prison. This event is sponsored by the Pennsylvania Council of Churches. For additional details and registration, see the event web page at <https://pachurchesadvocacy.org/event/apart-screening-feb-20/>

What justice and/or advocacy issues has your church worked on lately? What resources do you need, and what resources do you have to share? We'd love to hear from you. (See page 1).