

01-GS-26 VOTED with abstentions: The Twenty-third General Synod adopts the resolution “Juvenile Justice.”

JUVENILE JUSTICE

WHEREAS children and youth are important members of our families, churches, and communities;

WHEREAS Jesus reached out to the children with love and compassion when his disciples sought to send them away;

WHEREAS Jesus demonstrated through his ministry the importance of caring for offenders and indicated our responsibility to do the same when he said, “I was sick and you cared for me; I was in prison and you visited me”;

WHEREAS the criminal justice system in the United States has adopted a more punitive approach to juvenile offenders in the last two decades;

WHEREAS in the last six years, forty-three states have instituted legislation facilitating the transfer of juveniles to adult court, and all fifty states have laws allowing juveniles to be tried as adults;

WHEREAS the juvenile justice system of the United States arrests, detains, charges, convicts, and penalizes young people in an unfair manner, resulting in disproportionate numbers of poor youth and youth of color represented in the juvenile justice system;

WHEREAS the justice system, including the juvenile justice system, has become a repository for people with mental illnesses and behavioral disorders, but provides little, if any, care appropriate to treating and healing such illnesses, especially among young people;

WHEREAS youthful detention has been shown to teach skill in crime and deceit rather than educating people in high standards for life and ethical solutions to address life problems, and youth engaged in the criminal justice system often become enmeshed in such systems to their detriment, foregoing education and opportunity to the detriment of us all;

WHEREAS current legislative efforts are being made in the United States to legalize the imprisonment of children as young as ten years old for the commission of felonies, and

WHEREAS the United Nations Subcommittee On the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights resolved in August 2000 that the execution of people who were under the age of eighteen at the time of the crime “is contrary to customary international law,” and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (article 37(a), 1995) states: “neither capital punishment nor life imprisonment without possibility of release shall be imposed for offenses committed by persons below eighteen years of age,” but the United States continues to refuse to ratify this convention, and youth in the United States who committed crimes before the age of eighteen are vulnerable to capital punishment or life imprisonment; and

WHEREAS the teachings of Jesus hold us personally accountable to care for those who have been victimized and beaten down, as he illustrated in the story of the good Samaritan, and taught us to love all people, including those of us who have sinned, as he illustrated throughout his ministry;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Twenty-third General Synod of the United Church of Christ expresses its concern for the injustices of the juvenile justice system which affect the lives of many young people and their families, and thanks those United Church of Christ pastors, chaplains, and members who provide support for juvenile offenders and their families;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Twenty-third General Synod of the United Church of Christ affirms advocacy for fair and appropriate treatment of youth, especially as they are involved with or at risk for involvement with the criminal justice system, and encourages the provision of pastoral care, communities of Christian love, healthy alternatives to criminal involvement, and strong and effective leadership for our youth;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Twenty-third General Synod of the United Church of Christ calls upon Justice and Witness Ministries, in partnership with other national organizations and agencies addressing issues of juvenile justice, to rigorously seek to advocate for just, appropriate, and ethical methods to address juvenile crimes and to reduce the excessive use of police force, racial profiling, and substantial biases in the criminal justice system that favor some and disfavor others according to class, race, ethnicity, sexual identity, physical and/or mental ability, heritage, or other general classifications;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Twenty-third General Synod of the United Church of Christ calls upon Justice and Witness Ministries, in cooperation with local churches, Associations, Conferences, other covenanted ministries, the United Church of Christ Urban Ministries Network, and other appropriate groups, to encourage visitation, counseling, ongoing pastoral care, and education for youth in the criminal justice system or who are at risk for crime;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Twenty-third General Synod of the United Church of Christ calls upon Justice and Witness Ministries to work collaboratively and in an ecumenical and interfaith spirit with other religious communities and groups to encourage effective diversion and counseling programs and advocate for restorative justice principles as alternatives to incarceration of youth; and

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED that the Twenty-third General Synod of the United Church of Christ calls upon Justice and Witness Ministries, in partnership with local, state, and national organizations, to continue to work with legislative bodies to advocate fair and effective legislation to protect juveniles from early convictions and imprisonment, life sentences, and capital punishment, and to educate, protect, and provide opportunities for the wellbeing of our future generations.

Funding for this action will be made in accordance with the overall mandates of the affected agencies and the funds available.