



March 30, 2020

Presidential Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice

Via Email: LE.Commission@usdoj.gov

Dear Commissioners,

The National Council of Churches is a community of 38 member communions including denominations from mainline Protestant, historic African-American, and Orthodox traditions. Below is a statement from our Governing Board on the subject of police reform. This statement addresses the following issues before the Commission:

- How do certain social ills such as mental illness, substance abuse, and homelessness affect the ability of law enforcement to police?
- How can federal grant programs aide state, local, and tribal law enforcement?
- What is the cause of diminished respect for law enforcement and the laws they enforce, and how does it affect both police and public safety?
- What methodologies, techniques, and targeted deterrence can be employed to reduce crime?
- How can we integrate education, employment, social services, and public health services to reduce crime and ease the burden on law enforcement?

I invite you to consider the suggested reforms. Our churches have been and will continue to be important partners with both law enforcement and the communities that we serve as we strive to ensure the realization of justice for each person.

Submitted by,

Jim Winkler
General Secretary/President
National Council of Churches

A Call to Police Reform and Healing of Communities

In their cry, “No justice, no peace,” protesters in Ferguson, Baltimore, New York and in other cities across the country are expressing the same sentiments of disappointment and frustration as the prophet Habakkuk when he proclaimed,

“O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?
Or cry to you “Violence!”
and you will not save?
Why do you make me see wrongdoing
and look at trouble?
Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.
So the law becomes slack
and justice never prevails.”
Habakkuk 1:2-4a NRSV

The root of justice and peace is a moral belief in the intrinsic worth of all human life. The advancement of technology and use of social media have brought to light evidence of a disturbing truth – the lives of African Americans, particularly those in impoverished communities, are not valued as much as those of the wealthy and affluent. The misdirected “War on Drugs” and “get tough on crime” policies of the past decades have given birth to militarized police forces that do not best serve the people and communities they are mandated to keep safe.

The high-profile deaths of unarmed African Americans at the hand of police in many places such as Ferguson, Staten Island, North Charleston, and Baltimore are not isolated incidents. The incidents of police brutality resulting in major injuries and death are taking place so often we can barely keep up with the reports. This is a national problem that calls for a federal, state and local response.

According to the website Mapping Police Violence (<http://mappingpoliceviolence.org/>), approximately 263 African Americans were killed by police in 2019. This documentation is a collaborative project of private researchers and activists because no public or federal database is kept of this information.

In times like these people can be heard asking, “Where is the faith community,” or, “Is the Church relevant?” The answers can be found where the faith community is in the middle of the pain and the healing. Persons affiliated with the NCC through our member communions serve as prison and police chaplains; they are police and those who are incarcerated, returning citizens and family members, victims and perpetrators, pastors and community leaders. In the midst of civil unrest breaking out in cities across the country, our faith leaders have been at the forefront of peaceful protest actions and providing pastoral care for the community.

We commend and support law enforcement agencies that model good community

policing, and in the tradition of advocating for justice and peace and inspired by the prophet Isaiah to serve as “repairers of the breach” we call for an **overhaul of the justice system that brings about transformation. To this end we recommend the following steps towards police reform:**

- **Incorporate conflict transformation training as part of police training and a standard alternative or additional option for addressing offenses and criminal infractions.**
- **Reward police departments and officers for effective community policing strategies rather than arrest and ticketing quotas.**
- **Make training mandatory and continue to update for all law enforcement on issues of cultural sensitivity, interaction with the mentally ill, and responding to sexual assaults.**
- **Implement nationwide mandatory use of body cameras and provide federal funding for communities that cannot afford them. We reject attempts by municipalities to hide behind FOIA laws and other restrictions.**
- **Discipline police officers who do not wear their badges or provide business card with name and badge number when requested.**
- **Address the militarization of the police department and the abusive manner in which military surplus equipment has been used.**
- **Address the underlying problem of overcriminalization and the indiscriminate application of laws implemented by local police departments and the impact it has on communities and families**