

The Church Council on Justice and Corrections

200 Isabella Street
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Le Conseil des Églises pour la Justice et la Criminologie

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December 17, 2010

The Right Honourable Stephen Harper, P.C., M.P.
Prime Minister of Canada
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2

Dear Mr. Prime Minister,

The Church Council on Justice and Corrections (CCJC) is most concerned that in this time of financial cuts to important services you and the government of Canada are prepared to significantly increase investment in the building of new prisons.

Proposed new federal laws will ensure that more Canadians are sent to prison for longer periods, a strategy that has been repeatedly proven neither to reduce crime nor to assist victims. Your policy is applying a costly prison response to people involved in the courts who are non-violent offenders, or to repeat offenders who are mentally ill and/or addicted, the majority of whom are not classified as high risk. These offenders are disproportionately poor, ill-equipped to learn, from the most disadvantaged and marginalized groups. They require treatment, health services, educational, employment and housing interventions, all less expensive and more humane than incarceration.

The Canadian government has regretfully embraced a belief in punishment-for-crime that first requires us to isolate and separate the offender from the rest of us, in our minds as well as in our prisons. That separation makes what happens later easier to ignore: by increasing the number of people in jail for lengthier sentences you are decreasing their chance of success upon release into the community.

The vision of justice we find in Scripture is profound and radically different from that which your government is proposing. We are called to be a people in relationship with each other through our conflicts and sins, with the ingenious creativity of God's Spirit to find our way back into covenant community. How can that be if we automatically exclude and cut ourselves off from all those we label "criminal"?

Increasing levels of incarceration of marginalized people is counter-productive and undermines human dignity in our society. By contrast, well supervised probation or release, bail options, reporting centres, practical assistance, supportive housing, programs that promote accountability, respect and reparation: these measures have all been well-established, but they are underfunded. Their outcomes have proven to be the same or better in terms of re-offence rates, at a fraction of the cost and with much less human damage.

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Public safety is enhanced through healthy communities that support individuals and families. We, therefore, respectfully ask you to modify your government's policy taking into consideration the impact it will have on the most disadvantaged, its lack of effectiveness, and its serious budgetary implications.

Sincerely,

Laurent Champagne
Président CEJC / CCJC president