



CENTER FOR  
PUBLIC JUSTICE



# Reimagining Youth Justice

## How Faith-Based Leaders Can Get Involved

A Faith-Based Toolkit

Prepared By  
Community Connections for Youth

Produced by  
Center for Public Justice



# Intro

## About the Toolkit

This toolkit is a joint effort between **Community Connections for Youth** (CCFY) and the **Center for Public Justice** (CPJ) to equip people of faith to advocate on behalf of youth in the justice system. The toolkit was designed to help people of faith take practical steps towards supporting, advocating and serving young people who are at a critical juncture in their development, one threatened by their entanglement with the justice system.

The Center for Public Justice (CPJ) is a non-partisan, Christian civic education and policy research organization, with the mission to serve God by equipping citizens, developing leaders, and shaping policy to advance justice for the transformation of public life. CPJ takes a comprehensive approach to public policy issues, including criminal and juvenile justice reform. CPJ believes that faith-based organizations and houses of worship are critical to this work, and CPJ is invested in inspiring and equipping such institutions to be a part of transforming juvenile probation in their own communities.

Community Connections for Youth (CCFY) is a Bronx-based nonprofit organization whose mission is to equip grassroots faith and neighborhood organizations to develop effective community-driven alternatives to incarceration for youth. Since 2009, CCFY has labored towards the vision of a world with no kids in cages. CCFY intervenes directly on behalf of youth in the justice system of the South Bronx neighborhood and provides training and technical assistance to faith and neighborhood partnerships around the nation.

**This toolkit grows out of the advocacy work of CCFY's founder, Rev. Rubén Austria, who developed this paradigm while working to shut down New York State's harmful, costly and ineffective youth prisons. For Rev. Austria, closing youth prisons was only half the battle. The deeper, more important work of CCFY is to keep young people connected to community support that will help them thrive, and to reinvest the dollars saved by closing youth prisons into authentic grassroots initiatives. Rev. Austria communicates this message to the faith community through a reflection on the story of Moses and Miriam as recorded in the first two chapters of Exodus. This guide draws on his Miriam Message, which compares the plight of the Israelites in Egypt with the issues facing justice-involved youth today.**



The toolkit is divided into three sections.

### Section One

#### *Concern*

The first section begins by exploring God's concern for those suffering from injustice. God's response to the captivity of the Israelites in Egypt shows that God is concerned not only with individuals' relationships with God, but with relationships between people groups in political, economic and social structures.

### Section Two

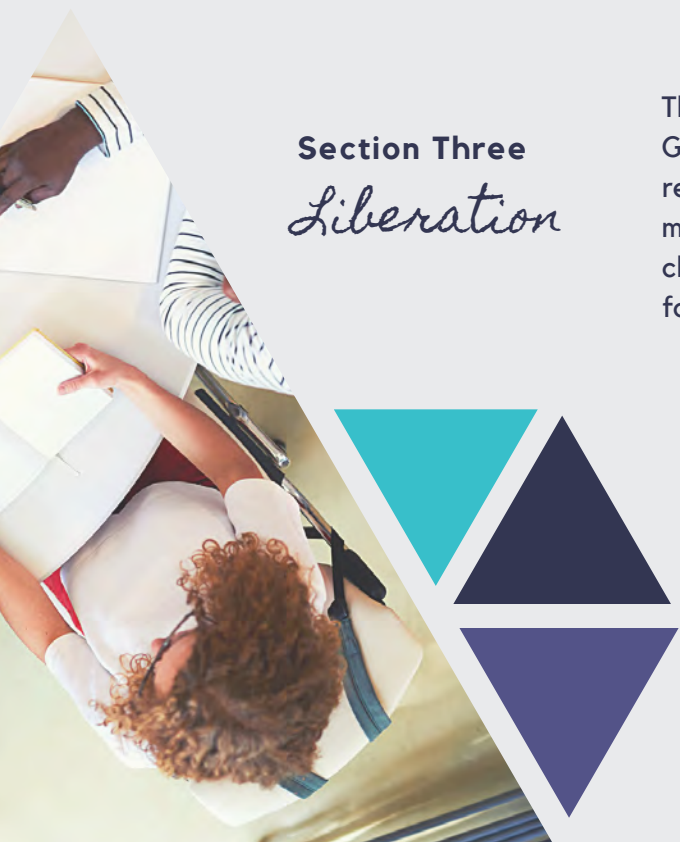
#### *Intervention*

The second section shows concerned people of faith how to discover what is happening in youth justice systems, through both landscape research and practical action steps. This section also provides practical tools for people of faith to provide support and advocacy to young people and families who are going through the system. Accompanying youth and families to court, writing letters of support, and speaking up for young people in court can have a powerful impact on the trajectory of a young person's system involvement. This section gives practical tools and resources to support youth and families in this way. This section also explores the most important supports that young people and families need when they are released back into the community and provides guidance on how people of faith can provide or help secure these services.

### Section Three

#### *Liberation*

The final section returns to God's heart for justice and God's desire for shalom for all people. The section offers resources for people of faith to join local and national movements for justice that move us toward a future where children have the opportunity to experience the freedom found in caring and supportive communities.



# Concern.

During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So, God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them. (Exodus 2:23-25, NIV)

Through Scripture we see that God is concerned with human suffering. While God is concerned with all people, He expresses special concern for the most vulnerable members of society such as widows, orphans and foreigners. Similarly, the Old Testament records many examples of God's concern for the Israelites when they are invaded, dispersed and taken into captivity. Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions all cite the Exodus from Egypt as a formational narrative in the story of how God demonstrates concern for all people.

## Real Life Application

### Why Are You Hitting Your Fellow Hebrew?

*As a teenager coming of age at the height of the crack epidemic, youth on youth violence was everywhere and I was more often a victim than a perpetrator. In fact, I had fled the city to attend college in a bucolic campus upstate largely to get away from the ever-present violence among youth in New York City. In 1998, I returned as an urban missionary to high-risk youth in the Bronx, hoping to help break the cycle of violence. One evening, one of the youth I mentored called me sobbing. His best friend had been stabbed at a party and bled out in seconds. This was no unfamiliar story in our community. A survey of South Bronx adolescents found that 23% reported being beaten up, 10% had been stabbed, and 8% had been shot. Furthermore, 60% had witnessed someone being beaten up, 25% someone being stabbed and 23% someone shot (Freudenberg, 1999).<sup>1</sup> Later that evening, in my prayer time, I began to cry out to God, asking why so many young people, especially young men, were losing their lives to violence. We're losing a generation of youth, I cried to God, and I need to know what your plan is to deliver us. I believed the Bible had all the answers so I began searching the Scriptures. To my surprise, I found that the most striking examples of violence were not about interpersonal violence, but rather state-sponsored genocide. Yes, God was concerned about street violence (see Proverbs). But, in the Book of Exodus, I saw that while Moses was initially concerned about Jew-on-Jew violence: "Why are you hitting your fellow Hebrew?" (Exodus 2:13) God was far more concerned about the way the Israelites were being oppressed. Coming from an evangelical tradition that viewed all sin and success through the prism of an individual's personal relationship with God, the Exodus narrative presented a strikingly different take on the problem of intraracial violence. Was the Israelite hitting his fellow Hebrew because of the sin in his heart? Or because of the misery of his enslavement? Was God more concerned with an outburst of violence between two oppressed individuals, or with delivering his people from bondage? Was God's ultimate plan to teach the exploited Hebrews how to survive in slavery, or to bring them into the Promised Land? Lastly, I saw in the Hebrews retort to Moses "Who made you prince and judge over us?" a rebuke to my own privileged status as a college-educated missionary whose formation was entirely different from the youth I served."*

<sup>1</sup> Freudenberg, N., et al. "Coming up in the Boogie Down: The role of violence in the lives of adolescents in the South Bronx."



# What is God Concerned About?

The Book of Genesis records the arrival of the Israelites in Egypt as a single family fleeing famine. They find favor in a foreign land by virtue of their younger brother Joseph's privileged position in Pharaoh's Court. By the first chapter of Exodus, however, their situation has taken a dramatic turn for the worse. Exodus begins by recounting the change in circumstances that lead to their enslavement and ultimately a planned genocide.

## Bible Reading

Exodus 1:6-22, NIV

Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, **7** but the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them.

**8** Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt.

**9** "Look" he said to his people, "the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. **10** Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country."

**11** So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. **12** But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites **13** and worked them ruthlessly. **14** They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly.

**15** The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, **16** "When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live." **17** The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. **18** Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, "Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?"

**19** The midwives answered Pharaoh, "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive."

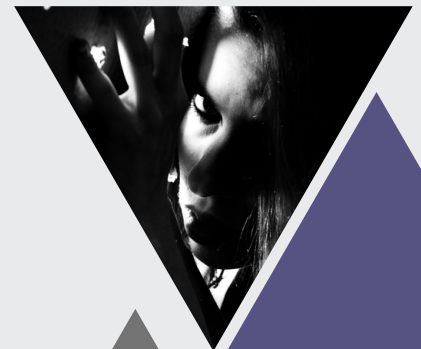
**20** So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. **21** And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.

**22** Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: "Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live."

## The Dynamics of Oppression

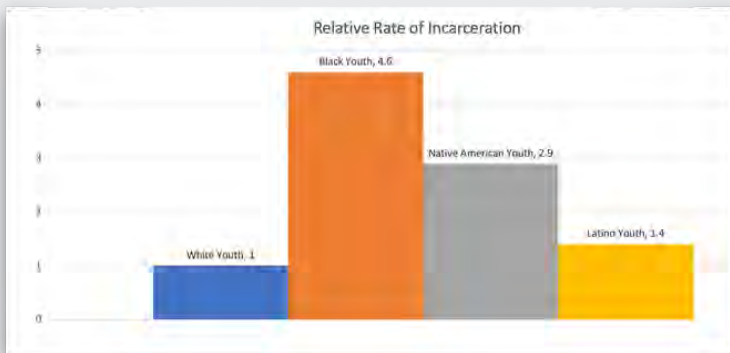
The first two chapters of the Book of Exodus give us a specific example of the captivity of the Israelites' captivity, and illuminates some dynamics of oppression:

- Change in demographic population
- Targeting Racial, Ethnic & Religious Minorities
- Fearmongering
- Economic Exploitation
- Harsh punishment
- Genocide



# Racial & Ethnic Disparities

**Incarceration in the United States is not race neutral.** Across nearly all decision-making points in the justice juvenile system, youth of color are more likely to be advanced deeper into the juvenile justice system, even when controlling for severity of offense. At the national level, Black youth are almost five times more likely to be incarcerated than White youth, Native American youth are nearly three times more likely to be incarcerated than White youth, and Latino youth are one and a half times more likely to be incarcerated than White youth.



2017 The W. Haywood Burns Institute. United States of Disparities Data Tool

The [W. Haywood Burns Institute](#), a leader in the fight for racial equity in youth justice has information on the status of racial disparities on a state-by-state basis, compiled on their web portal: [The United States of Disparities](#).

Where local data is publicized varies by city and county. However, publicly accessible state data is available at the federal level as the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act requires states to report data annually on youth incarceration, disaggregated by race, gender and ethnicity. This data is available on the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) website in the [Easy Access to the Census of Juvenile in Residential Placement \(EZACJRP\)](#).



## Exercise One

What are the relative rates of incarceration in your state for youth of color? Using the Burns Institute's United State of Disparities [website](#), find the following information for your state.

White Youth	Black Youth	Latino Youth	Native American Youth	Asian Youth	Other

Put another way, in my state Black youth are incarcerated at \_\_\_\_\_ times the rate of White youth. Latino youth are incarcerated at \_\_\_\_\_ times the rate of White youth. Native American youth are incarcerated at \_\_\_\_\_ times the rate of White youth, and Asian youth are incarcerated at \_\_\_\_\_ times the rate of White youth.

# Economic Exploitation

Why did Pharaoh refuse to let the Israelites go? Was it simply because his heart was hard? Did he hate the Israelites? Or was he afraid of losing an economic asset, namely free labor to build the store cities of Pithom and Ramses? Decarceration is a threat to economies that have grown heavily dependent on incarceration as an economic lifeline.

In 2008, two judges in Luzerne County, PA were convicted of taking kickbacks for sending kids to a for-profit detention center for extremely trivial offenses like mocking a school principal on social media, stealing a CD from Walmart, and trespassing in a vacant building. The investigation found that the judges had colluded with the detention center to get them a contract and then received additional cash payments in exchange for ordering youth to detention. The detention center operator in turn billed the county for the cost of detaining youth. The Kids for Cash<sup>2</sup> scandal, as it came to be known, is the grossest and most extreme form of incarcerating kids for profit. But for-profit juvenile prisons are just the tip of the iceberg. Far more common are the economic benefits attached to publicly-operated youth detention and placement centers; these places provide employment and service contracts and facilitate additional economic growth for communities through correlated industries like transportation and restaurants serving visitors and employees alike. Juvenile incarceration is a multi-billion dollar industry that has sustained entire communities.



## Exercise Two

**How much does it cost to incarcerate children in the United States?**

A 2014 Report by the Justice Policy Institute found that 33 states and the District of Columbia spent more than \$100,000 per year to incarcerate just one youth. In 2020, the Justice Policy Institute reported updated data on the price of youth incarceration. Access the report [here](#) to find out how much it costs to incarcerate one youth in your state.

State	Cost per Day	Annual Cost per Youth



<sup>2</sup>Kids for Cash, film by Robert Nay, 2014




To learn more on the subject of racial oppression & systemic injustice we recommend these award winning documentaries:

- > When They See Us
- > Kids for Cash
- > Central Park Five

# Bearing Witness to Suffering

Now a man of the tribe of Levi married a Levite woman, and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months. But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him. (Exodus 2:1-3, NIV)


In the age of social media sharing and internet activism, it is easy to champion a cause without ever interacting with real people who are suffering. God's justice is not adherence to an abstract set of principles but a fierce commitment to the wellbeing of those He loves. In God's kingdom, justice flows from relationship. At the start of the second chapter of Exodus, we see an activism based on relationships and love. Moses's parents hide their son from those who would do him harm. When they can no longer hide him in their house, they move him to the river. His sister Miriam stays near him, waiting and watching, to see what will happen. The Hebrew word here for watching does not convey a passive act of observation. Rather, it signifies remaining alert, on guard and looking for an opportunity to intervene. It is the same concept Jesus used when he told his disciples to watch and pray. (Matthew 23:41)



## How can people of faith take part in this active watching on behalf of youth in the justice system?

There are a number of ways to watch and pray, bearing witness to suffering, and looking for opportunities to intervene, including:

- 1 Supporting members of your own congregation who are impacted by the justice system
- 2 Supporting Alternative to Incarceration (ATI) programs that work with justice-involved youth
- 3 Observing court proceedings
- 4 Visiting youth in detention



*On the following pages we present a breakdown of these steps you and/or your faith group can take in carrying out these interventions.*



# 1

## Supporting members of your own congregation who are impacted by the justice system

The report [Families Unlocking Futures: Solutions to the Crisis in Juvenile Justice](#) found that 1 out of 2 family members impacted by the justice system identified as belonging to a faith community. Yet many of them shared in interviews and focus groups that they hid this fact from their church family due to the stigma. They feared being judged as an unfit parent who should have prevented their child from going down the wrong path. "I don't blame the children, I blame the parents," "You know whose fault this really is? The mother and the father." "They should lock the parents up when kids commit crime." This fear of judgment, whether imagined or real, keeps many family members from speaking the truth about their situation and deprives them of the support they need as they go through an unimaginably difficult situation.

How can clergy and faith leaders support members of the beloved community who are dealing with the stress of having a child in the justice system?

Here are some practical ways to communicate acceptance, support, and love:

**Preach themes articulated in this toolkit that challenge the paradigm that sin is only individual and not structural**

**Invite guest speakers to preach, teach or share testimonies about God's work in the justice system**

**Offer to pray for upcoming court dates for those who have a loved one in the justice system**



### Real Life Application.



**Charismatic Catholic Priest in New Jersey who offers prayer and accompaniment for court dates**

Father Phil Latronico has served as the Chaplain of the Community of God's Love in Newark, NJ for over three decades. He also serves as a Youth Minister and a Police Chaplain and regularly advocates for young people in the juvenile justice system. Every week at Mass, he makes space for families to share the names of young people who have upcoming court dates during the prayers of the people, so the church can add them to their petitions. This simple practice communicates to all parishioners, but especially the family members of justice-involved youth, that the church is a place of support, not judgment for those who have kids in trouble with the law.

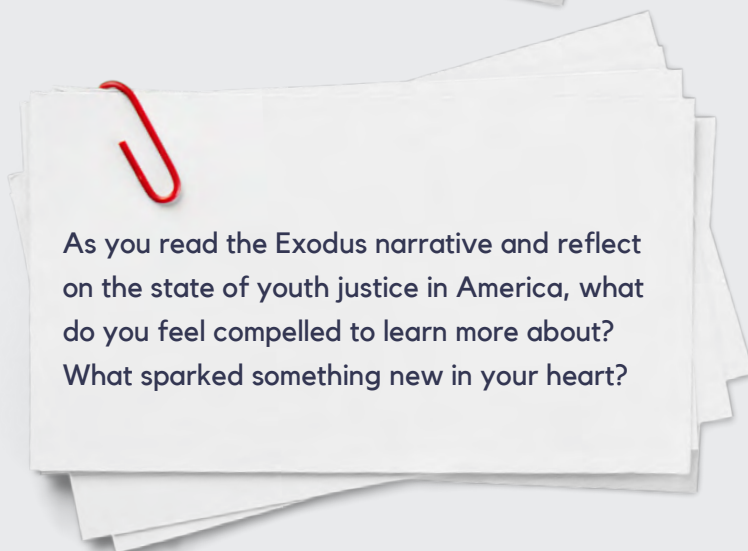
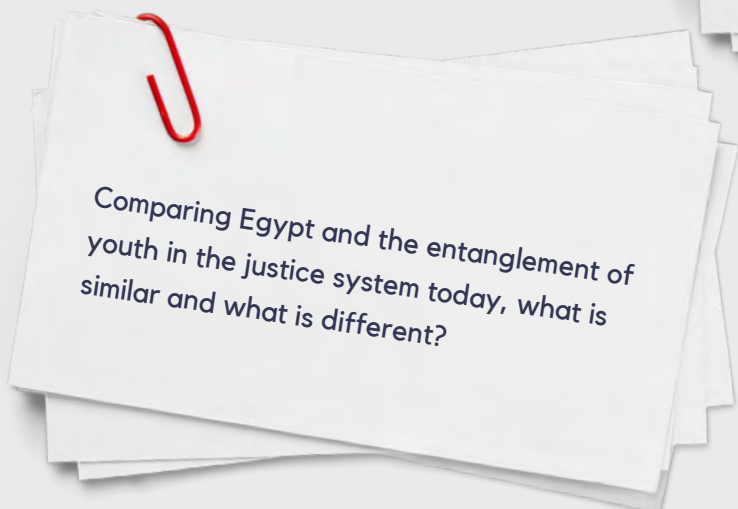
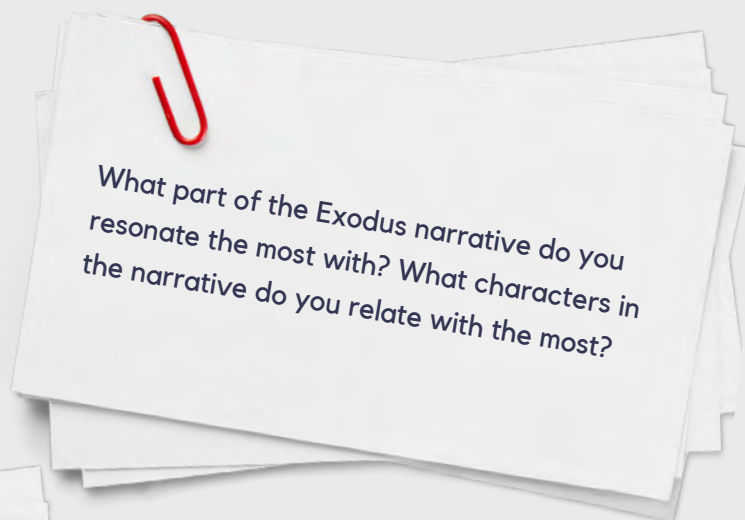
# 2

## Supporting Alternative to Incarceration (ATI) programs that work with justice-involved youth

In many cities, there are Alternative-to-Incarceration (ATI) programs for youth. These range from short-term alternatives to detention where youth report while their cases are pending to longer-term services that support youth after sentencing. Some of these programs are faith-based and naturally welcome volunteers from the faith community. Most are secular and may be wary that faith-motivated volunteers are only interested in proselytizing. We recommend finding people and programs who are already deeply embedded in the work of liberating youth from prison and humbly approaching them to ask if you can learn from them.



Here are some questions for discussion for dialoguing with others engaging with this material:



# 3

## Court Observation

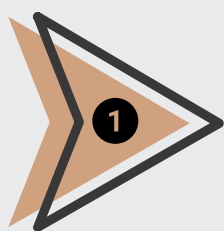
Observing juvenile justice court proceedings provides a powerful window into what is happening with young people in the justice system. Here are some responses uttered by clergy after spending a day in Family Court observing delinquency proceedings:



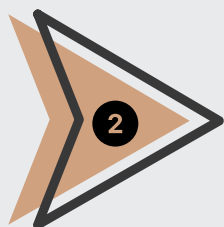
This first-hand observation is a great way to learn how the system works, to get recognized by court personnel, and even to change the atmosphere of the courtroom. In 2012, Community Connections for Youth partnered with the Bronx Clergy Criminal Justice Roundtable and the Legal Aid Society to bring [clergy](#) to observe juvenile delinquency proceedings in Bronx Family Court. During the debrief, one public defender stated: “I've never seen judges be as kind and respectful to my clients as they were today.”

### How to get into court:

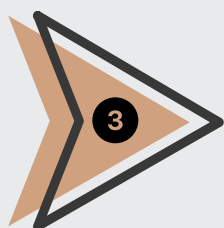
In many jurisdictions, delinquency proceedings in Juvenile Court are open to the public. This unfortunate disregard for the privacy of children nonetheless creates an opportunity to shine light and bring fresh air into a dark and dank area. **Steps clergy can take to observe court:**



*Going with the family of a young person is always the easiest way as privacy and confidentiality protections become irrelevant when you accompany a parent who wants you there.*



*Review Family Court guidelines for your jurisdiction to see if delinquency proceedings are in fact open to the public.*



*Ask officers of the court (judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys) if you can shadow them in court for a day. Defense Attorneys tend to be very amenable to these requests as the presence of clergy is often beneficial for their clients.*



# 4

## Visiting Detention



**"I was in prison and you visited me." —Matt 25:36, NIV**

To Jesus, visiting someone in prison was as expected an act of discipleship as feeding the hungry, caring for the sick and giving water to someone who was thirsty (Matt 25:36). He went as far as to say that whatever we did or did not do in this regard to the least of these was a reflection of our relationship with Him. Visiting young people in prison is one of the best ways to see and understand the suffering of those Jesus calls his brothers and sisters. There are some detention centers where there are months-long waiting lists for ministries who want to come and do religious services for youth. Sadly, some of these ministries will celebrate the conversions they achieve at a chapel service, and yet never lift a finger to support youth when they come home. There are other facilities, usually long-term placements far from the communities youth call home, where there are hardly any visitors or volunteers, faith-based or otherwise. These places are fertile ground for visiting youth in prison and establishing supportive relationships with those who are desperately in need of a supportive relationship.



### *Real Life Application.*

#### Outside the City Gate

In 2002, I was invited by the evangelist Rev. Maythia Henriquez to join her on her weekly visit to the adolescent unit at Rikers Island. At that time, 16 and 17 year olds were still automatically charged as adults and were detained at Rikers while awaiting the outcome of their case. She had asked me to come to speak about my program so the young people would know they had somewhere to go for support when they got out — at least that's what I thought. Getting into Rikers Island is a complex process that takes at least an hour once you arrive at the entrance (it takes an hour to get to the complex itself or to get through the checkpoints within the complex) to the complex, which sits in the East River between the Bronx and Queens. Near one of the last checkpoints, Rev. Henriquez turned to me and said "the young people are so excited to have you as the guest preacher tonight!" I protested that I was just there to make an announcement and had nothing prepared, but she wasn't hearing it. "I guess you'll just have to speak whatever word the Lord gives you," she said as she introduced me. That night I preached a short message to young people at Rikers. I don't remember exactly what I preached on, but I know that I felt the Holy Spirit like I had never had before. Later that evening, back at my studio apartment in the South Bronx, I couldn't shake the spiritual high that I had never gotten from a church service or revival meeting. As I searched the Scriptures, I came across this passage in Hebrews:

*The altar from which God gives us the gift of himself is not for exploitation by insiders who grab and loot. In the old system, the animals are killed and the bodies disposed of outside the camp. The blood is then brought inside to the altar as a sacrifice for sin. It's the same with Jesus. He was crucified outside the city gates—that is where he poured out the sacrificial blood that was brought to God's altar to cleanse his people. So let's go outside, where Jesus is, where the action is—not trying to be privileged insiders, but taking our share in the abuse of Jesus. This "insider world" is not our home. We have our eyes peeled for the City about to come. Let's take our place outside with Jesus, no longer pouring out the sacrificial blood of animals but pouring out sacrificial praises from our lips to God in Jesus' name. (Hebrews 13: 10-15)*

And then it hit me that the reason I felt so close to God that night was because I had gone to where Jesus was. The Lord of Lord and the King of Kings wasn't with the privileged insiders in the temple or the marketplace. He was on an island penal colony far from the city center among African-American and Latino teenagers charged with crimes. I don't doubt that I brought some comfort to the youth at Rikers that evening. But more importantly, I met Jesus in a way I never had before. When people ask how I received my call to ministry, I tell them it came that night at the adolescent unit on Rikers Island.





*Section One*

# Questions for Group Discussion



*What surprised you the most in this section?*

*What questions or concerns did this section bring up for you?*

*Of all the different ways to take part in active watching on behalf of youth in the justice system listed in this section, which one do you think you or your church could participate in?*

# Intervention.

## Bible Reading

Exodus 2:1-10, NIV

1 Now a man of the tribe of Levi married a Levite woman, 2 and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months. 3 But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket[a] for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. 4 His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him.

5 Then Pharaoh's daughter went down to the Nile to bathe, and her attendants were walking along the riverbank. She saw the basket among the reeds and

sent her female slave to get it. 6 She opened it and saw the baby. He was crying, and she felt sorry for him.

"This is one of the Hebrew babies," she said. 7 Then his sister asked Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?" 8 "Yes, go," she answered. So the girl went and got the baby's mother. 9 Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you." So the woman took the baby and nursed him. 10 When the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. She named him Moses,[b] saying, "I drew him out of the water."

**There is so much to unpack in this narrative about how God's unseen hand is at work to set a plan for deliverance in motion.** Moses's sister, who cannot be more than 12 years old and likely much younger, displays incredible courage, determination and quick thinking as she sees an opportunity to save her baby brother. Pharaoh's daughter just so happens to come to the river to bathe at the right place and time to encounter the baby Moses. This helpless baby boy, targeted for destruction, moves into a position of incredible power and privilege - but not before being nursed and nurtured by the very mother who under tremendous pressure had earlier put him in God's hands not knowing if she would ever see him again. This sister is likely Miriam, who appears again in Scripture in Exodus 14, leading the women in worship after they cross the Red Sea. She is named in Scripture as the Prophetess who led her people out of Egypt along with her brothers Moses and Aaron. Before Moses reluctantly accepted God's call to liberate his people, and before Aaron was drafted to speak for him, Miriam's advocacy for the baby in the Nile set in motion the chain of events that would lead to the deliverance of the Israelites.

# A Strengths Based View

The juvenile justice system is perhaps the most virulent example of a deficit-based approach to youth, and how can it not be? The whole premise for a young person's involvement in the system is their alleged commitment of a dangerous, antisocial or unlawful act. Intake assessments and psychosocial evaluations focus at best on childhood traumas and resultant dysfunctions, and at worst on dangerous impulses that need to be curbed. Far too many evaluations look at urban youth and families of color through the prism of the white, middle class ideal. For example, someone might lament the absence of a father in a home and the lack of a male role model all the while ignoring the child's strong and nurturing relationship with their grandfather who lives in the apartment next door. This swirl of negativity and prejudicial assumptions causes young people and families to shut down and disengage, which in turn confirms a bias that they are hostile, apathetic, and resistant to help.

What a privilege then for a person of faith to serve as the person who unwaveringly shines the light of faith, hope and love on a young person, choosing to see them as a gift made in God's image, full of talent, purpose and promise. This is no pollyanna-ish avoidance of reality, nor is there much risk in painting youth in an unrealistically positive light that would jeopardize public safety or minimize their need for treatment. They have already been assessed by law enforcement professionals using actuarial tools to measure risk, and diagnosed by clinical specialists trained to diagnose psychological, emotional and social disorders. Leave the risk assessment and the clinical diagnosis to those specialists. The role of the person of faith is to see the gift of God in a young person, to speak life into dead situations, and to call things that are not (yet) as though they should be.

People of faith have the opportunity to call on the government to perform its rightful responsibility as an institution to protect children and communities while also ensuring that the structure of family is not destroyed and the dignity of young people is honored. The government has a responsibility to take crime seriously but it also must uphold an equitable justice system for juveniles. A justice system truly focused on protecting and caring for young people should not only be focused on retributive justice but instead focused on restorative justice. A vision of restorative justice requires policymakers, judges, attorneys, community organizations, faith leaders, and families to all work together in their roles to promote the flourishing of youth in a community. Citizens can help hold their policymakers accountable by advocating for policies that end unsafe practices in youth detention centers and prevent stringent punishments for low level crimes in youth courts. Faith leaders can hold judges and attorneys accountable by being present in a courtroom. All members of a community can help restore youth to their community by helping them find jobs, education, and a sense of stability. God designed a world with unique structures and institutions like government as a blessing but those institutions are impacted by the fall of man. As people of faith, we can acknowledge that the current juvenile justice system is broken and to address that brokenness we have a responsibility to call on the government to reform a system that is failing its community.



**Let's return to Scripture momentarily to see the strengths even in the midst of this terrible ordeal (Exodus 2:2–10, NIV):**



*Moses was a fine child: the Scripture says that Moses's mother "saw that he was a fine child." He may have been born into slavery and marked for death, but he was still a fine child. His status in Egypt as a male Hebrew child made him a threat, putting a target on his back from the moment of his birth. None of this changed the fact that this was a baby boy made in God's image, born with a purpose and – perhaps unbeknownst to anyone at the time – sent by God to deliver his people from the hand of the Egyptians.*



*His family cared for him: the Scripture tells us that Moses's mother hid him and protected him. When she could no longer safely keep him home, she prepared the best possible covering to keep him safe as she entrusted him to God. Youth in the juvenile justice system are automatically assumed to be the offspring of disengaged, dysfunctional, abusive or enabling parents. "I don't blame the youth" the saying often goes, "I blame the parents." Yet what Scripture shows is a mother striving to do everything in her power to protect her beloved son within the constraints of her own captivity.*



*There are system allies: we cannot forget that Pharaoh's daughter and her handmaidens played a role as well. Something touched Pharaoh's daughter to look favorably on this Hebrew child. Perhaps her female slaves identified with the child and presented him in a way to engender compassion. In any case, instead of enforcing Pharaoh's genocidal policy of throwing every Hebrew male child into the river to die, she decides to adopt Moses and raise him as her son.*



*God provides resources: for Moses's mother, simply knowing that her child had been spared death would have been an answered prayer. Having the child returned to her, albeit temporarily, to nurse and nurture until he went to live in Pharaoh's household, must have seemed like a miracle. As an enslaved woman from a people whose primary value was their ability to provide free labor, being paid to nurse her own son must have seemed the type of blessing on top of a blessing that only God can do. Who knows how long Moses's mother nursed him? A wet nurse can continue to provide milk as long as the child continues to suckle. In some cultures, children continue to nurse until they are 9 or 10 years old. The way the text reads suggests that Moses was with his biological mother until he was old enough to be somewhat independent. Who knows what prayers Moses heard his mother lift up to God while in her care. Who knows what words of blessing, affirmation and purpose she spoke as he nursed at her breast? Though Moses would go into Pharaoh's palace and be educated and raised as an Egyptian, he went knowing that he was a Hebrew and knowing who his God was.*



# The Ministry of Presence

Presence is one of the most underrated ministries. When Job suffers unimaginable tragedy losing his children, his livelihood and his physical health, three friends visit him. For seven days, they simply sit with him, add space putting on sackcloth and ashes and saying nothing (Job 2:11-13). This practice, the Jewish tradition of Shiva, demonstrates that in the most tragic seasons of our lives, where no words can convey the pain we feel or the comfort we wish to convey, the simple act of sitting beside someone is the most powerful thing we can do. Job's friends are ultimately rebuked by God for trying to dissect and analyze his tragedy. They are rebuked, however, for their words of explanation, not their gentle presence. You may not know what to say. You may not know what to do. You may have as little understanding of the juvenile justice system as the young person and family you are accompanying. Still, your presence as a caring, non-anxious presence speaks volumes. It speaks to the young person and the family who know that someone is supporting them in their darkest moments.

## Waiting Room Ministry

Court dates are by far the most nerve-wracking times for young people and their families. For youth who have been released to their parent's custody, each subsequent court date has the potential to end in incarceration. A negative report from their probation officer could result in the judge ordering the young person to be remanded to detention pending the duration of their case. For youth who have been detained, anxious parents, grandparents and other family members huddle in the waiting room hoping this will be the day their child is released.



***"I have never been asked by youth to pray for them more than right before their case is called in court, and never been asked by family members where my church is more than when I accompany them to a court date." —Rev. Ruben Austria***

## Courtroom Presence

Accompanying youth to court sends a powerful message to all in the courtroom that the young person in question is not alone. The courts consider community ties as a factor in deciding whether to parole (release) a young person or to remand them to detention pending the outcome of their case. Similarly, the presence of supportive community members at a dispositional hearing (sentencing) impacts whether a young person remains in the community on probation, or is placed (incarcerated) at a facility. Because juvenile courtrooms are often small, intimate settings, the simple presence of clergy, lay leaders and other community members impacts the decision of judges.



# The Court Letter

Another powerful tool faith leaders can use to influence what happens in the courtroom is a letter of support for a young person with an open case. As previously mentioned, there is no shortage of negative information about the young person submitted to the courts. Their prior offenses, risk assessment scores, psychosocial intake assessments and probation resorts almost always focus on the negative. For example, a common way to describe a young person's peer association is to write "the young person denies affiliation with any street gangs." Similarly, a description of the young person's relationship to substances might read, "*the young person admits to using alcohol and marijuana on occasion, but denies any dependency on these substances. The young person denies ever using cocaine, crack, opioids, methamphetamines, LSD, or any other illegal substance.*" School reports list the number of days truant and any disciplinary incidences (suspensions, expulsions). Seen through this prism, young people are at best not engaging in illegal, antisocial, or inappropriate behavior, or at least not admitting to it. Little to no mention is made of any positive behavior, achievements, supportive relationships or character development happening in a young person's life.

**“ “Meet the kid, not the file.” —Youth Advocate Programs**

*"There have been times when I've reviewed a young person's file and have been nervous about meeting with them based on the information presented that makes them out to be a monster. Then I get in the room with them and find out they're just a regular kid."*

*—Douglas A. Knepper, LMSW, M.Div.*

A well written court letter can convey an entirely different picture of a young person, and force the courts to wrestle with a different question. "What risk is there to society if we don't incarcerate this young person?" is the way the courts often frame the issue. When a person of faith presents a hopeful view of a young person based on their innate gifts, talents and character, a different question emerges: "Given this young person's enormous potential and all they have going for them in spite of the act they committed, however serious and dangerous it might be, do we risk destroying this young person's future and all the good they could do for society if we put them in a cage?"

Writing an appropriate court letter, sometimes called a letter of support or a character reference is a much needed skill. A letter of support need not be written by someone with clinical expertise or legal training. A letter of support does not need to argue to the courts that a young person is not a safety risk. A letter of support simply presents a picture of a young person that shows the most positive aspects of who they are and communicates growth and progress that may not be captured anywhere else. It goes without saying that the contents of such a letter are usually gleaned from a relationship with a young person and not an abstract conclusion drawn from afar.

## Letters of support can include:

- Statements about a young person's talents and gifts
- Positive reports about past accomplishments
- Observations of growth and maturation
- Examples of community ties and community service
- Knowledge of the young person's family and other supportive relationships



## Here is a template for a Letter of Support from a clergy member:



May 24, 2022

I am writing this letter on behalf of Alex, a young person I have been mentoring for the last 6 months following his release from juvenile detention last November. I am a youth minister at the Greater Refuge Baptist Church in Harlem and met Alex while conducting religious services with my church at the detention center. Upon his release, Alex voluntarily sought out continued support and we have met in the community on a regular basis since then.

I find Alex to be a highly intelligent and thoughtful young man who is thoughtful about his future. He shows a great deal of curiosity and a willingness to think deeply about life. In our mentoring relationship, he has been very reflective about his life journey and has shown the ability to think critically about both positive and negative aspects of his community and how it has shaped him.

During our mentoring sessions, Alex has identified that he has some peer and family relationships that often put him in compromising situations. He has started to take some active steps to reduce the time he spends with negative influences and to replace those with positive connections. Over the last two months, he has started to attend our monthly men's fellowship breakfasts on Saturday mornings. I have observed him gleaning wisdom from the experiences shared by men in the church, some of whom are returning citizens who were formerly incarcerated. One of the men in our fellowship was incarcerated with Alex's father, and I have seen how Alex is especially attentive to the life lessons this man shares. As the court is aware, Alex's father died 3 years ago while still in prison, which also coincides with when he started getting into trouble. These relationships with mature older men seem quite influential to Alex who has articulated the void he felt when his father passed, and his need for a positive male role model.

I have also observed Alex mature in his understanding of community and service. He has volunteered with the church's food pantry and joined our Thanksgiving Boxes of Love outreach where we distributed turkeys and other Thanksgiving dinner items to community members in need. In our mentoring sessions, he has reflected on how good it feels to do something positive in his neighborhood. He seems especially adept at connecting with younger children and has spoken about his desire to help youth avoid some of the mistakes he made. He recently articulated a vision for a summer basketball tournament for youth that could give young people an opportunity to be productively engaged in recreational activities instead of hanging out in the streets.

I have also seen Alex take steps towards completing his education and becoming gainfully employed. Given his age and lack of credits, he prefers to earn his high school equivalency degree, while securing vocational training. He has applied to both Youth Build and Job Corps programs and his admission is pending. Given his intellect and ability to stay focused, I believe that he has a high prospect for success in this area. He has been especially interested in the earning potential that comes from union trades and civil service jobs. One of the men in the church has guaranteed him a job with his contracting business if he earns his degree and completes a trade certification. Similarly, one of the women in the church who is a supervisor with the Metropolitan Transit Authority has offered to guide him through the application process once he earns his degree. I hope the courts will recognize that Alex is a young man who truly deserves the opportunity to reach his full potential. I am committed to continue working with Alex and I hope the courts will give him the chance to demonstrate he can be a productive, law-abiding citizen in his community.

Please feel free to contact me at [MinisterBrown@GreaterRefuge.Org](mailto:MinisterBrown@GreaterRefuge.Org) or (718) 555-5555 with any questions.

Sincerely,

Min. Darwin L. Brown  
Greater Refuge Baptist Church

\*Names and personal information were changed to protect the identify of individuals.

## Here is a template for a Letter of Support from a program:



June 12, 2022

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing this letter on behalf of CH, a student who has been receiving services from Community Connections for Youth since January of 2022. Community Connections for Youth is a non-profit organization whose mission is to promote and develop community-based alternatives to incarceration for youth.

C enrolled in services on January 26th, 2010 after being referred by his parents, M and J H. After separate interviews with Mr. and Mrs. H and with C, I determined that C would benefit from a specialized program that includes individual counseling, community service, and assistance with seeking employment.

Since enrolling in services in January, C has maintained excellent attendance and has fulfilled all of the objectives set for him by the program. He has completed ten individual counseling sessions with me in which he has made much progress in identifying positive and negative peer associations, consequential thinking, and decision making. I have been very impressed with C's ability to engage in moral reasoning, set future goals, and identify areas where negative peer influences could adversely impact his ambition for professional success.

C's commitment to pursuing a future where he is a productive member of society is perhaps most evidenced by his re-enrollment at Long Island University where he is a scholarship student. He re-enrolled this semester after a period of absence in which he had been employed. He has dedicated himself to his studies and received excellent grades in the Spring Semester of 2010. C has also engaged in several pro-social activities at the school. He joined the Haitian Students Club and volunteered to raise funds to help earthquake victims in Haiti, and also joined his school's Christian Club.

C also completed a voluntary community service project with Community Connections for Youth by assisting with a project to raise awareness about cuts in the state budget to youth services, summer jobs and alternatives to detention. His activities included coordinating a mailing to New York State leaders, educating peers and community members about the issue, and mobilizing members of our faith-based coalition to advocate for programs and services for youth. While working in our offices, he impressed staff and other volunteers with his diligence, attention to detail, and good manners.

C has continued to seek employment, filling out applications, going on interviews and researching job opportunities online. While he has not yet secured a paid position, he has shown dedication in pursuing employment and vocational growth. To keep himself occupied and to gain skills while seeking a paid position, C is volunteering 3 days per week at a hospital and has already completed 120 hours of unpaid work activity. He has also completed a driving instruction class en route to earning his drivers license.

Having met with C regularly since January, I can testify that he is an extremely bright young man who has a strong positive future orientation. He has maintained his commitment to his studies and has clear personal and professional goals, which include graduating from college, beginning a career in finance, and starting a family. In our counseling sessions, I have been impressed with his ability to reason, to reflect on his mistakes, and to clearly articulate a decision-making process that will help him avoid future trouble with the law. I have also observed him respond with increasing maturity and spiritual wisdom to challenging life situations, choosing to act as a peacemaker in situations of conflict. Although his participation in our services is voluntary, he has been a model participant, seeking to make the most of his time with us, engaging fully and wholeheartedly with both myself and other staff members.

I have also witnessed him make difficult decisions to progressively distance himself from peers whose conduct could put him at risk for further conflict with the law. He has shown remarkable wisdom and maturity in replacing these associations with friendships that reinforce his desire to lead a productive and law-abiding lifestyle. He has renewed his engagement with the young adult group at his church, and re-established connections with members of the faith community who are helping guide him in a positive direction.

C is also clearly surrounded by strong familial and community support systems, including parents who are very engaged in his life, a strong church community, and various friends and family members who reinforce positive values and lifestyles.

Please feel free to contact me at [info@cc-fy.org](mailto:info@cc-fy.org) or (347) 590-0940 with any questions.

Sincerely,

Rev. Ruben Austria  
Founder & Executive Director

*\*Names and personal information were changed to protect the identify of individuals.*



Letters to the courts on behalf of a young person should follow these principles:

REPORT DOs	REPORT DON'Ts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✔ Present a hopeful vision based on concrete observations</li><li>✔ Speak to the supports you can offer a young person</li><li>✔ Recognize major milestones and accomplishments</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✘ Don't sound overly optimistic</li><li>✘ Don't make promises or guarantee success</li><li>✘ Don't include every little detail</li></ul>

In any case, a good practice when planning to submit any documentation to the court on behalf of a young person is to vet it with the young person's lawyer first. We don't suggest giving editorial power to a defense attorney, as their ethical obligation is to strive for the least restrictive outcomes for their client, regardless of whether that level of freedom is best for the young person's growth and development. However, developing a strong relationship with a young person's defense attorney is a beneficial practice, and a brief review by their lawyer accomplishes two things: (1) it provides a safety check to ensure that you don't accidentally disclose something incriminating or harmful to the young person (for example: "I know he's growing because he told me that last night he was so mad that he got his brother's gun and went out looking for his enemy (it's better to be more specific here) planning to shoot him, but then, when he was halfway out the door, he thought better of it and went back inside."); (2) it provides the defense attorney, who responsible for making the argument why the young person deserves to avoid incarceration, with information they can use to argue on behalf of their client.

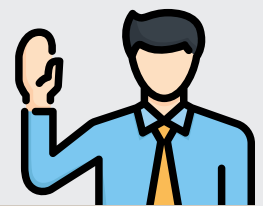


# Testifying in Court



Testifying in court is perhaps the most challenging act of support, as a dispositional hearing may include incisive questioning from a judge or prosecutor. These days in Juvenile Court, requests to hear from a community representative rarely rise to the level of full-blown cross-examination. However, those who plan to speak in court need to prepare to put forth their best presentation of why they believe a young person can succeed in a community setting.

As with submitting a court letter, it is always wise to check with a young person's defense attorney before volunteering to make a statement. Do not be offended if a defense attorney asks you not to speak. It is not uncommon for youth and their guardians to want to speak in court only to be silenced by their own counsel. This is because defense attorneys know that "anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law" and want to avoid even inadvertent slip-ups that hurt their client's cause.



**There are occasions where judges want to hear from community supporters, especially in low-pressure situations such as a post-disposition follow-up hearing or a probation violation conference. In these cases, a well-prepared verbal statement can make a huge difference.**



In these situations, we strongly recommend first preparing a written report that outlines the information a community advocate wants to share. One of the best strategies is to keep one's remarks closely aligned with the written report and not to go off script. Clergy, especially those from more charismatic and pentecostal backgrounds, may delight in improvising and following where the spirit leads. But we would do well to keep our remarks tied to the themes and facts articulated in our written testimony. There is always the chance that a keen-eyed judge will ask incisive questions about discrepancies between our oral and written testimony or that an overzealous prosecutor will use the opportunity to discredit our entire testimony. Therefore CCFY recommends the following:

- Stress the concrete reasons for why you believe a young person can succeed in the community
- Don't get pulled into tangents
- Stick to the areas covered by the written script (court letter)
- Don't get emotional, intimidated or confrontational if provoked
- Don't guarantee success or predict outcomes you can't control
- Don't commit to supervision or reporting you don't have the capacity to provide

For a perfect example of staying on script when someone questioning you is trying to goad you into saying something unhelpful, see this [video](#).



## After Court

The court date is a high-pressure scenario where a young person's freedom hangs in the balance. But rarely is a case resolved after one, or even several, court dates. Court dates are commonly adjourned and even after cases reach disposition/finding/sentencing, young people are at risk of returning to the system through re-arrest or non-compliance with court conditions. Furthermore, when youth are on probation or under some type of ongoing supervision, they are under the microscope of a system that scrutinizes their behavior and often negatively sanctions them for behaviors that are common among teenagers (truancy, missing curfew, smoking marijuana, etc.). Young people who avoid being remanded to detention or placed in a secure facility may find themselves back in challenging situations that left unaddressed will likely result in re-arrest or violation of their probation.

Some of the most common risk factors for justice-involved youth are:



- Involvement with negative peer influences/gangs
- Lack of involvement in positive structured activities
- Lack of relationship with positive adults
- Family conflict
- Disconnection from school
- No money/no legal employment
- Unstable housing
- Untreated mental health issues
- Addiction/substance abuse

For these reasons, it is important to identify and connect youth with programs and services that can meet their needs in these areas. **Here are some recommended programs to link to:**



**Positive Youth Development:** Programs with activities that are fun, engaging, stimulating and age-appropriate. Youth who are younger (ages 12 to 15) need to be engaged in afterschool and weekend activities that build skills, promote leadership, and develop interests and character. Activities popular with youth can include sports and physical fitness, art and music, computer technology and coding - pretty much anything that holds their interest and motivates them. Sadly, many positive youth development programs are designed for youth who are already motivated to participate, behave well in structured settings, and have plenty of family support. Look for positive youth development programs with staff who are not intimidated or judgmental towards justice-involved youth. And give young people choice in selecting activities that interest them. Look for programs that are successful at engaging young people with behavioral challenges, not ones that only serve the best-behaved youth.



**Credible Messengers:** Perhaps no other intervention is showing as much promise as Credible Messenger Mentoring, which connects formerly incarcerated mentors with youth currently going through the justice system. By virtue of their lived experience and their success in transforming their own lives, Credible Messengers are able to connect with youth who others struggle to reach, and can teach young people how to walk the path of transformation. Credible Messenger Mentoring programs are spreading across the country and many organizations offer group mentoring sessions. The Credible Messenger Mentoring Movement (CM3) is a network of organizations following best practices and supporting the growth of this movement.



**Family Support:** Juvenile justice systems have been notoriously poor at engaging the family members of justice-involved youth. Families report feeling ignored, stigmatized and blamed for their child's involvement (Justice 4 Families). Families are repelled by programs with pejorative names like Common Sense Parenting and Functional Family Therapy. On the other hand, peer support programs in which family members who have been impacted support parents/caregivers whose children are currently going through the system are increasingly popular. See CCFY's report "Like Part of the Family."



**Education:** Justice-involved youth are often in challenging situations when it comes to education. Many youth are in the system for school-based incidents and may be facing suspension or expulsion. Other youth have safety concerns and fear going back to school. Schools sometimes use a child's absence from school when locked up as a pretext for discharging them and refuse to re-enroll them. Some youth may have stopped attending school long before they wound up in the system. For youth in the justice system to succeed, they need to be in the right educational setting that sets them up for success.





**Employment Training:** There are few things adolescents want more than a job. Youth want money in their pocket and are extremely motivated to work - but often have trouble securing and holding on to a job. For youth who have missed a significant amount of school or may have learning disabilities, employment training is even more important. Older youth benefit greatly from programs that offer a combination of educational and vocational programs, ranging from college prep to high school equivalency and trade certifications.



**Comprehensive Case Management:** In a healthy, well-functioning system, youth would have all their needs met by a well-coordinated network of providers who work collaboratively to ensure service integration. In reality, youth are misdiagnosed, referred to inappropriate or poorly-run services, and continually fall through the cracks. Housing, mental health, and substance abuse are some of the most common needs. People supporting justice-involved youth should identify programs that provide effective case management/advocacy/strategy plans and be prepared to advocate for youth with service providers if such services don't exist.



# Exercise Three

## Program Worksheet



**Directions:** For each service, identify the program(s) in your community that has the best reputation for providing effective programming for justice-involved youth. A trustworthy contact at a reliable program in each area is far more valuable than a directory of services that are hit or miss. Use this worksheet to identify the best providers in each area.

Service Area	Program Name	Services Provided	Point of Contact (name, phone, email)
Positive Youth Development			
Credible Messengers			
Family Support			
Education			
Employment Training			
Comprehensive Case Management			

**While all of these programs and services are important, the two things young people need most are to connect with caring adults and to stay engaged in meaningful community programming.**

A national survey of youth in detention found that the two characteristics most widely shared by delinquent youth were 1) lack of relationship with caring adults and 2) lack of involvement in positive structured activities (Mendel, 2000)<sup>3</sup>. Your faith community probably doesn't provide all the services listed above, but it certainly can provide meaningful relationships and positive structured activities! Don't fret about what you don't have and use what you do have to support young people in the justice system.

<sup>3</sup>Mendel, R. A. Less Hype, More Help: Reducing Juvenile Crime, What Works—And What Doesn't.

## Serving vs. Proselytizing

For many faith communities, sharing the good news is as natural as breathing. People who have experienced transformation through faith are often eager to share what God has done in their lives. When it comes to justice-involved youth, the faith community is a tremendous resource, but people of faith must take seriously the ethical considerations of serving this vulnerable population.

First, any time court mandates are in play, faith-based organizations must make sure they are not violating the first amendment. Judges can use their legal authority to mandate young people to participate in programming and services as an alternative to incarceration. Religious organizations can provide programming to youth as a court-mandated alternative to incarceration, but these programs can never include mandatory religious instruction, worship, or compulsory participation in church services. It is a violation not only of religious liberty but of the spirit of the gospel to compel young people to worship or pray under threat of incarceration.

Second, even if young people are not mandated to participate, faith communities should be careful not to violate the principles of radical acceptance and unconditional love. When faith communities embrace vulnerable young people, it is not uncommon for youth to become interested in the more explicitly religious programming of the congregation. We have seen young people join youth groups, attend Sunday services and even ask to be baptized. But we have also seen young people experience a sense of betrayal when the people who have embraced them suddenly seem only interested in their church attendance. What initially seemed like unconditional love now seems highly conditional upon adhering to the tenets and practices of the faith, making young people wonder if they ever really cared about them. There is nothing wrong with welcoming young people into one's faith community. But the people who are supposed to model God's unconditional love must be willing to provide young people with the same level of support regardless of their level of interest in the faith.



### *Real Life Application.*

#### **Tianna & Ashley**

Tianna was a 13-year old girl in the Bronx who was being raised by her maternal grandparents. Her father had killed her mother when she was younger and was serving a life sentence in prison. Her grandparents, loving as they were, were functional addicts, one dependent on alcohol and the other on crack cocaine. Tianna was matched with a mentor, Ashley, from a church in the Bronx. Ashley and Tianna met weekly, developing a strong mentoring relationship and Tianna began to grow in positive ways. One day, Tianna asked Ashley if she could visit her church. Ashley agreed to bring her to a Friday night service and introduced her to the youth group which met the same night. Tianna loved the church and became a regular at the Friday night youth group. After several weeks, however, a conflict with other girls in the youth group drove Tianna away from the church. Ashley continued to reach out but Tianna wouldn't take her calls, completely avoiding her. At one point, Ashley caught up with Tianna at her school and asked her why she was running from their relationship. "Miss, I don't mean to disrespect you," Tianna said "but no matter what you say to me I'm not going back to your church." Ashley waited a beat, looked Tianna in the eyes and said "I'm not here to try to get you to come back to church. I'm here because I'm your mentor and I want to have a relationship with you regardless of whether you go to my church or any church ever again." When Tianna realized that Ashley's interest in her was independent of her engagement (or lack thereof) with church, the mentoring relationship was restored.

\*Names and personal information were changed to protect the identify of individuals.



*Section Two*

# Questions for Group Discussion



*What surprised you the most in this section?*

*What questions or concerns did this section  
bring up for you?*

*Of all the different ways to have a ministry of  
presence listed in this section, which one do you think  
you or your church could participate in?*



# Liberation.

## Bible Reading

Exodus 3:7-10, NIV

The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them."

So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

## Survival in Captivity? Or Deliverance?

The story of Miriam and Moses shows us how God used the prayerful, watchful availability of a young girl to set in motion a chain of events that would eventually liberate her people and fulfill God's promise to turn Abraham's descendants into a mighty nation. Miriam's advocacy for her baby brother in Exodus 2 shows us the power of one individual advocating for a single child. In a situation of captivity and genocide, where an entire generation of boys were being slaughtered, Miriam's simple offer "Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?" was life-saving. We should remember the power of individual advocacy in situations where the systemic nature of the problem seems overwhelming, as the following parable demonstrates.

### Parable of the Starfish

One day a man was walking along the beach when he noticed a boy picking something up and gently throwing it into the ocean. Approaching the boy, he asked, "What are you doing?" The youth replied, "Throwing starfish back into the ocean. The surf is up and the tide is going out. If I don't throw them back, they'll die." "Son," the man said, "don't you realize there are miles and miles of beach and hundreds of starfish? You can't make a difference!" After listening politely, the boy bent down, picked up another starfish, and threw it back into the surf. Then, smiling at the man, he said... "I made a difference for that one."

But the Exodus narrative does not end after Chapter 2. Miriam's advocacy for her baby brother not only saves him — it leads to the liberation of an entire people. God is concerned with each individual child, but not just with saving them from death and destruction.

God's purpose is not to help the Israelites become well-adjusted captives in Egypt, but to liberate them and bring them into the Promised Land. Similarly, we believe that God is not only calling people of faith to advocate for individual youth in the system, but to challenge the very system that puts kids in cages. God is calling us to much more than creating alternatives to incarceration. God is calling us towards a vision of complete liberation where the captives are free. **The parable of the babies in the river speaks to this as well:**

### Parable of the Babies in the River

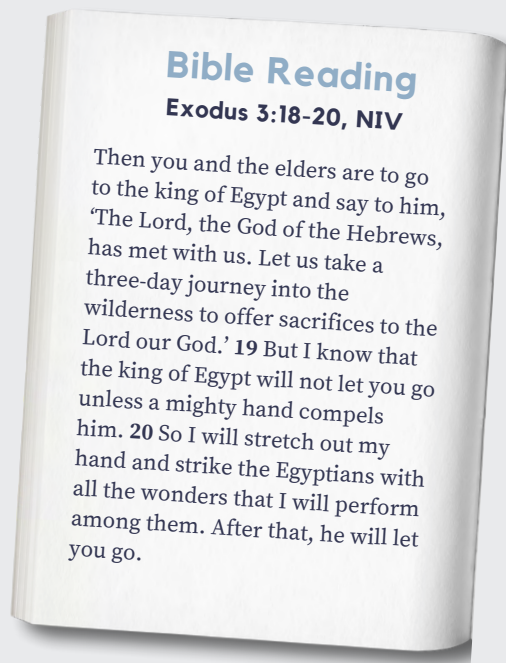
Once upon a time in a riverside village, a woman noticed a shocking sight: a drowning baby, crying its lungs out, being washed downriver. She rushed to save it, rescuing the baby just before it went over the falls at the edge of town. The next day there were two babies in the river; the day after, three more, then four. With the help of her neighbors, the woman saved them, too. When babies kept washing downstream, the village banded together, setting up a 24-hour rescue watch. Still, the babies kept coming. So the community installed an elaborate alarm system and strung safety nets across the river but was still overwhelmed trying to save the babies. Finally, they asked the village wise man, who had the solution: "Let's go upstream and see who's throwing the babies in the river. If we stop them from being thrown in up there, we won't have to rescue them down here."



As the Exodus narrative continues, we see that God's plan was not only for Moses to be saved. God would then call Moses, along with his brother Aaron and his sister Miriam, to confront Pharaoh and demand "Let my people go!" God's plan is not only for us to get kids out of cages but to create a world where there are no cages for kids. This will happen when God's people learn to advocate not only for individuals, but for an end to the structures and systems that perpetuate the cycle of incarceration.

# Let My People Go

As the Exodus narrative continues, we see that God's plan was not only for Moses to be saved. God would then call Moses, along with his brother Aaron and his sister Miriam to confront Pharaoh and demand "Let my people go!" God's plan is not only for us to get kids out of cages but to create a world where there are no cages for kids. This will happen when God's people learn to advocate not only for individuals, but for an end to the structures and systems that perpetuate the cycle of incarceration.



**“Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has. It never will.”**  
—Frederick Douglass

People of faith should be involved in the ministry of mercy and acts of charity, supporting youth and families involved in the justice system. To intercede and advocate for those facing punishment is also a deeply spiritual act. But the faithful must also stand up and boldly speak truth to power, calling on tyrannical powers to stop oppressing the poor, the widow, the orphan and the alien. They must also make the demand to the captors: Let my people go!



**When Israel was in Egypt's land,  
Let my people go!  
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,  
Let my people go!**

**Chorus:  
Go down, Moses,  
Way down in Egypt's land.  
Tell old Pharaoh  
To let my people go!<sup>4</sup>**

<sup>4</sup>Go Down, Moses. African American Spiritual. Public Domain



## What does it look like when people of faith stand up and advocate not only for individual youth but for systemic change?

There are several examples that show us the power of people of faith organizing to call for an end to retributive and racially biased systems of punishment:

- At the Bronx gathering of the National Day of Prayer in 2002, clergy lent their support to the youth-led No More Youth Jails Campaign, praying for an end to youth incarceration. They also asked the faithful to send pre-printed letters to the mayor, demanding the city abandon its plan to spend \$160 million to add 100 new beds to its two juvenile detention centers which were operating below capacity. Hundreds of church members sent these letters and within a week, the city abandoned its plans to expand the juvenile detention centers.
- In 2012, the Conference of Catholic Bishops joined advocacy efforts to end life without parole for juveniles. The bishops have observed for more than a decade that “[p]lacing children in adult jails is a sign of failure, not a solution.” They joined more than 100 organizations that have endorsed the Statement of Principles of the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth, including the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church, the Muslim Public Affairs Council, and the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs. Supporters also include groups representing law enforcement officials, victims’ families, mental health experts, parents, teachers and child welfare advocates ( <https://ejj.org/news/us-conference-catholic-bishops-calls-for-end-juvenile-life-without-parole-sentences/> )
- Connecticut’s legislature refused to take up the issue raising the age of criminal responsibility until one day in 2006 when dozens of clergy took to the steps of the state legislature to demand an end to the practice. The visual of faith leaders in their clerical attire, each representing hundreds of Connecticut voters, inspired legislators who raised the age of criminal responsibility in 2007.



*"When legislators see 100 demonstrators, they count 100 votes. When they see 100 clergy, they automatically multiply the number of votes by at least 100 and now they are seeing 1,000 voters."*

*—Marcy Mistrett, Campaign for Youth Justice*



# No Kids in Cages?

We believe it is possible to end juvenile incarceration. A world where there are no kids in cages is not just an idealized vision but a very real possibility in our lifetime. Consider the following:<sup>5</sup>



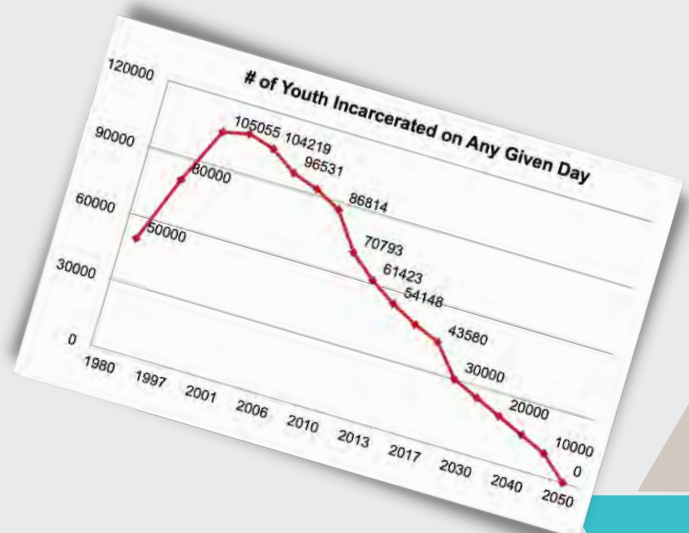
For much of the latter half of the 20th century, the total number of youth incarcerated on any given day in the United States hovered around **50,000**.

In the 1990s, a spike in juvenile homicides and a scare campaign about “juvenile super-predators” resulted in an unprecedented increase in the juvenile incarceration rate, especially for African-American and Latino youth. The number of youth incarcerated on any given day climbed above **100,000** by the year 2000.



Through advocacy efforts to repeal punitive laws, campaigns to close youth jails, and investments in alternatives to incarceration, the number of youth incarcerated has steadily fallen back to pre-1980 levels and is now at its lowest number in 4 decades. As of 2019, only **45,380** youth were incarcerated on any given night

If we as a society have been able to reduce the number of youth incarcerated by more than 60% over the past 20 years, how much further can we go with a concerted effort by people of good faith and goodwill to keep kids out of cages? Who’s to say that we couldn’t get the number down to 25,000 by 2030? And then to 10,000 by 2040, and maybe even to zero by 2050? The goal of zero youth incarceration is not some pipe dream but a very achievable goal in our lifetime. In recent years, Connecticut became the first state to eliminate youth prisons, (though there are still youth in residential facilities and detention centers).



<sup>5</sup>Statistics: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, website.

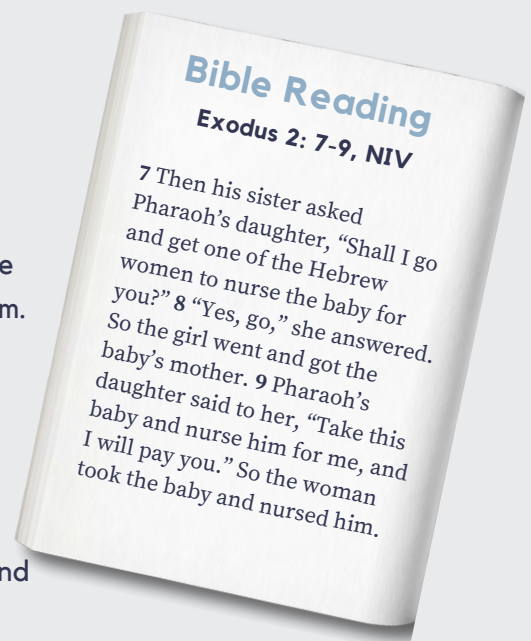
## So, How Do We Get There? A Vision for Justice Reinvestment

Achieving zero youth incarceration is possible, but it is much more than simply closing youth prisons or keeping kids out of the system. Keeping kids out of cages is certainly a tremendous way of reducing harm, and every youth prison closure reduces the likelihood of youth incarceration.

But achieving zero youth incarceration will require investment in an affirmative vision of justice, one that heals instead of harms and restores instead of punishes. Not only will it require alternative ways of dealing with harm, it necessitates investing in the supports that young people need to thrive in their communities: excellent schools, affordable and dignified housing, economic opportunities for youth and adults, health and wellness, music, arts, and recreation, trauma recovery, family support and all the protective factors that help keep middle-class white youth out of the justice system. A massive investment of resources is needed and warranted to provide young people of color with the support they need to live out their full God-given potential.

Where will our society find these funds and resources? How will we pay for this in a time of scarce resources and economic instability? The truth is there is no shortage of resources - they are just being invested in the wrong things. Think back to the cost of youth incarceration. Imagine if the \$300,000, \$400,000, or \$500,000 spent on incarcerating just one young person for a year was instead invested in comprehensive support for that youth and family. Resources of that magnitude could pay not only for the cost of alternative programs 10 times over, but for top-notch education, supported work, comprehensive mental health treatment, and more.

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***"Nothing stops a bullet like a job."***

***—Father Greg Boyle,  
Homeboy Industries***

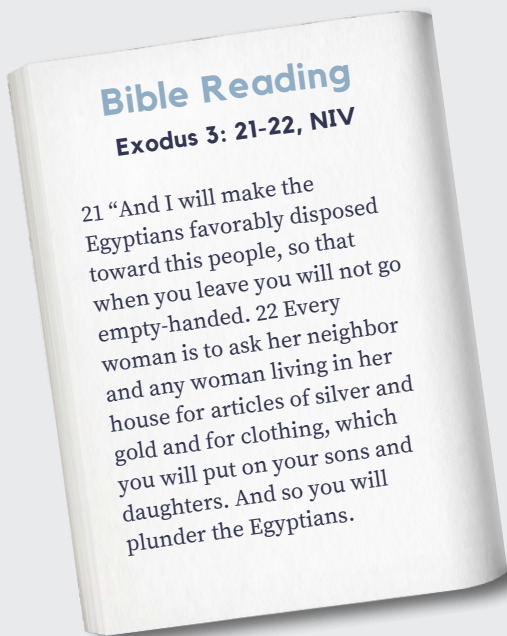


## Exercise Four

How might you reinvest the money it costs to incarcerate just one young person in your state?

Annual cost to incarcerate one young person	# of Youth Kept Out of Prison	Total amount of resources freed up	
\$300,000	10	\$3,000,000	
What could you use the freed up money for?			
Category	Cost/Unit	#Units	Budget
Credible Messenger Mentor	50,000	1	\$50,000
Family Engagement Specialist	\$50,000	1	\$50,000
Supported Work/Youth Stipends	\$1,000/month	12 x 10	\$120,000
Housing Support	\$2,000/month	12 x 10	\$240,000
Mental Health Support	\$200/week	52 x 10	\$104,000
		TOTAL	

**But should our hard earned tax dollars be spent on people who have committed crimes and caused harm?** They already are. Not only are they spent on incarcerating youth, but when you add in the cost of police officers in schools, juvenile probation officers, family court judges, mental health assessments, drug testing, and more, the amount spent on monitoring, catching and punishing youth is staggering. And it is not working. If we are going to spend massive amounts of government resources to address crime and public safety, should we not spend it on things that actually build communities instead of tearing them apart?



We read in the text that not only did God deliver his people out of Egypt, but He funded their liberation with the resources of their oppressors. Rev. Harold Dean Trulear, Executive Director of Healing Communities USA and Professor of Applied Theology at Howard University School of Divinity, makes the point that a common saying in the church is "you can't build God's kingdom with Pharaoh's money," but that is precisely what the Israelites did. God caused the Egyptians to give up their resources to fund the next phase of their journey with God to the Promised Land.

## Advocacy Resources

How can people of faith join in the movement to end youth incarceration, advocate to overturn unjust laws, close youth prisons, and most importantly, stimulate investment in the types of supports youth need? Thankfully there is already a movement underfoot, which is increasingly coordinated. Much of this movement emerged from young people fighting back against police in schools, youth jails and prison expansion, and demanding that the resources spent on punishing them be returned to their communities. Most states have advocacy campaigns to fight youth incarceration.

**Here are just a few of the groups that have their pulse on the fight to replace youth prisons with community alternatives:**

- [Youth First](#)
- [Community Connections for Youth \(CCFY\)](#)
- [Dream Beyond Bars \(CA\) Youth Opportunity \(NY\)](#)
- [Children's Defense Fund](#)
- [My Brother's Keeper](#)
- [Community Justice Network for Youth](#)

**Furthermore, many cities and states have localized campaigns to fight mass incarceration, such as:**

- [Youth Justice Coalition](#)
- [Strong Arms of Jackson](#)
- [Citizens for Juvenile Justice](#)
- [The Sentencing Project](#)
- [Justice for Families](#)
- [Decarcerate Illinois](#)
- [Maryland Cure](#)



# A Vision for Shalom



Finally, we end by affirming again that God wants so much more than to put a stop to oppression, injustice and exploitation. He is against those things because they stop his people from flourishing. What does God want to see? We know from Scripture that God's desire is not only to liberate his people from bondage, but to bring them into the Promised Land. The first part of God's promise is that He will "come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land" but the second half of that promise is that He will bring them "into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex 3:8). For many advocates, fighting back against a cruel and oppressive criminal justice system is the entirety of the message. We make our demands in the form of stopping what we dislike: NO MORE YOUTH JAILS! NO KIDS IN CAGES!

But the prophetic imagination calls us to imagine so much more. God is not only concerned with ending suffering and stopping oppression. His intention for His people is for full and complete dignity, healing, peace, justice, fullness, prosperity and joy.

There is perhaps no other word in Scripture as inadequately translated as the Hebrew word SHALOM. Most translations simply use the English word "peace" to translate Shalom. But peace is insufficient to capture the true meaning of Shalom.

## [The Meaning of Shalom<sup>6</sup>](#)

*The root word of Shalom is "shalam". One of the first uses of the word shalam in the Torah is in Exodus 21 and 22. In these 2 chapters, it is used 14 times. Moses is giving instructions to the people about what to do when someone causes material loss or in the case of theft of property. When that loss or injury occurs, the owner is considered lacking or not complete. The one responsible was to make things right. In the translation of Exodus 21-22, shalam is translated as "make it good", "shall surely pay", "make full restitution" or to "restore". The ancient Hebrew meaning of shalam was "to make something whole". Not just regarding practical restoration of things that were lost or stolen. But with an overall sense of fullness and completeness in mind, body and estate.*

Our vision for youth justice needs to go far beyond a world with no youth prisons. We need an affirmative vision of youth justice in which young people who once were destined for cages are now thriving in families that are being healed and communities that are being restored. We need a vision that includes the richness and fullness of every good thing that God created for the people He loves. Is it any wonder that pronouncements of the Kingdom and the coming of the Messiah follow these themes?

The peace of Shalom is not merely the absence of war. Similarly, an affirmative vision for youth justice is not just the absence of cages but one in which young people experience healing, wholeness, peace, prosperity and fulfillment. Is it possible to get there? The situation today looks daunting. We continue to see disturbing levels of police brutality, childhood poverty, gun violence, racially disparate justice outcomes, income disparities, health disparities and every type of social inequity.

<sup>6</sup> Hershey, Doug. "The True Meaning of Shalom." 24 June 2019, website.

## Bible Reading

Luke 4:16-19, NIV

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

**The peace of Shalom is not merely the absence of war. Is it possible to get there? The situation today looks daunting. We continue to see disturbing levels of police brutality, childhood poverty, gun violence, racially disparate justice outcomes, income disparities, health disparities and every type of social inequity.**

For some time after the George Floyd protests there appeared to be an appetite among the mainstream to confront racism in the criminal justice system. Yet shortly thereafter, a familiar script has emerged where fear-mongering and inflated media coverage of crime has convinced many that public safety is only possible with a return to harsh criminal justice practices. We are presented with a stark binary choice: "are we going to lock up these kids? Or leave them out on the streets to kill one another (and us)?"

We don't have all the answers. We have not yet seen what a world with no youth prisons could look like. We don't know yet what alternative interventions need to be in place for the very serious situations where children have committed homicide and are so bound up in gangs, so disconnected from family and other positive supports, that it is hard to imagine responsibly keeping them out of a locked facility. Yet there are many around the nation who continue to labor, to pray, to intervene on behalf of young people everyone has given up on. There are those who are organizing, fighting, striving for a world without youth prisons, challenging unjust laws. There are people mentoring youth, supporting parents, providing jobs and other economic opportunities, finding educational opportunities, and facilitating inner healing. Sometimes this movement feels like a trickle, but we turn once again to the prophetic visions put forth in Scripture, such as that in Ezekiel 47:

## Bible Reading

Ezekiel 47:1-12

The man brought me back to the entrance to the temple, and I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was coming down from under the south side of the temple, south of the altar. 2 He then brought me out through the north gate and led me around the outside to the outer gate facing east, and the water was trickling from the south side. 3 As the man went eastward with a measuring line in his hand, he measured off a thousand cubits[a] and then led me through water that was ankle-deep. 4 He measured off another thousand cubits and led me through water that was knee-deep. He measured off another thousand and led me through water that was up to the waist. 5 He measured off another thousand, but now it was a river that I could not cross, because the water had risen and was deep enough to swim in—a river that no one could cross. 6 He asked me, "Son of man, do you see this?"

Then he led me back to the bank of the river. 7 When I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river. 8 He said to me, "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah,[b] where it enters the Dead Sea. When it empties into the sea, the salty water there becomes fresh. 9 Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live. 10 Fishermen will stand along the shore; from En Gedi to En Eglaim there will be places for spreading nets. The fish will be of many kinds—like the fish of the Mediterranean Sea. 11 But the swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they will be left for salt. 12 Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear fruit, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing."

*Section Three*

# Questions for Group Discussion

*Did any part of this section make you feel uncomfortable or challenge the way you viewed juvenile incarceration?*

*Do you have any questions about this section or from the earlier two sections now that you have finished the entire toolkit?*

*What are your top three takeaways from the toolkit?*



# Call to Action

As you process the information in this toolkit, we encourage you to get involved in youth justice advocacy and/or services that directly support youth in your own city or state. You can learn about those opportunities by researching diversion, violence prevention and intervention, credible messenger programs and/or restorative justice programs that already exist. You can also decide to start a program or supportive services in your church or organization. Remember, providing court advocacy can have an amazing positive impact on the trajectory of a young person! You can become an advocate through nonprofits like [CASA](#) or write to Community Connections for Youth and The Center for Public Justice if you have questions around what you can do to get involved!

This resource has offered a number of places to start, but keep in mind, the learning is in the doing and as your faith and works conjoin, you will see the fruit of this amazing work of compassion. By yourself, you may be pulling just one child out of this river, but in joining forces with the growing number of people committed to keeping kids out of cages and surrounding them with healthy community, you may live to see the day when youth incarceration is no more.

**Our prayer is that you become part of this gathering movement of peace, healing, and life for the youth in our communities and future generations.**





# Credits



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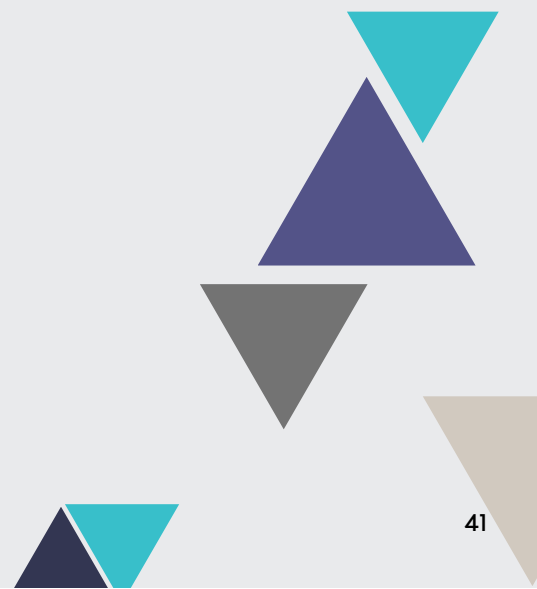
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