



## Church Engagement

**Heather Rice-Minus, Vice President of  
Government Affairs, Prison Fellowship**

Thank you. So today we've heard a lot about what's wrong with justice in America. We've heard some statistics from Dr. Iglesias and Dr. Levine and how we got here. We've also heard about why we as Christians have a duty to respond. And maybe you're feeling like I do, sometimes a little overwhelmed and not sure quite where to start. So, my goal here tonight is to do two things.

First, after all this bad news of where we are in mass incarceration, I'd like to give you a little good news. The peak US prison population in 2009 was over 1,600,000. And by 2015, we were down by 5.4% to roughly 1,500,000. So that may not seem like a lot, but I think it's a lot to the 1,000,000 people who got to go home and their families. And there are some policies I want to outline. Just a few of the ones we're working on that helped make this possible.

And second, I want you to leave here today feeling like you can indeed do something with all the great things you've learned today about advocacy and through advocacy. I think we heard some great things. I loved what pastor Kelly said about, invite someone to your dinner table, right? And so I think we know as Christians how to minister to people, and not only minister to people in prison, but invite them into our homes and walk alongside of them. But I think it's a little bit more daunting to think about, how do we actually create systemic change? How do we advocate as the church? And so, I want to give you several practical things you can do even as soon as tonight to start advocating.

First, some policy solutions. Some of the good news. I want to highlight some of the promising reforms that are gaining steam across the country. You know, after these decades of tough on crime rhetoric that we heard Dr. Iglesias talk about, that ushered in harsher sentencing policies, it's pretty incredible to me that we've actually started to see a reverse trend in some states, even red states. Many states have made efforts to reclassify felonies into misdemeanors to increase judicial flexibility in sentencing. And thankfully, many states are also making it possible so that the age of juvenile court jurisdiction goes up to 18 year olds. So that 16 and 17 year olds aren't charged automatically as adults.

And perhaps thanks to our failure rate in some of our prisons in terms of recidivism, we're also seeing more states be open minded about alternatives to incarceration. Things like drug courts, mental health courts, veterans courts, and even restorative justice programs that bring

together the victim of the crime and the person responsible and actually work out a plan for that person to make amends that doesn't involve incarceration. Likewise, we're seeing the expanded use of community corrections. So that adults and youth can be held accountable through programs and services in their community instead of the default response of prison.

And many states are establishing earn time credits, which allow people to earn time off their sentence in exchange for successfully completing different prison programs that are proven to reduce recidivism. So this is a great thing. Not only is it benefiting that person who make it to go home earlier, but it's benefiting the community as a whole, because people are going to be better prepared as they re-enter the community.

We're also seeing states rethink responses to technical violations. And what I mean by that as an example is, someone may have a duty to visit their parole officer and miss that meeting. That's not a new crime, but you could get sent back to prison for it. And so what we're doing is we're having more measured responses to those technical violations instead of sending people back.

And as we heard earlier today, in terms of collateral consequences, people face all kinds of obstacles because of their criminal record. Not being able to apply for certain jobs, professional license. Not being able to vote or get access to educational loans. Well more states are recognizing that these things don't make sense. And they're actually preventing people with criminal records from contributing to our communities. And so we're seeing states eliminate or at least limit collateral consequences.

And along those lines in 2017, we saw Congress at the US Senate, passing unanimous resolution, and several states are governor's issue, Second Chance month proclamations or resolutions to raise awareness about the obstacles that people with a criminal record face and to raise awareness about how we, all of us, including the church can be part of unlocking second chances.

Okay, so now that I've given you a few things that we can have some hope in, I want to talk about ways that we as a church can advocate for change and be part of making sure that these types of solutions are coming forward in our justice system. But I think a lot of us think of advocacy as direct lobbying or government affairs but it starts so much sooner than that, right? Before we can change policies, change laws, we have to change hearts and minds. And believe it or not, something as small as changing your language, when enough of us start doing it can have momentum. And that momentum can change the culture and how people in prison and those with a criminal record who want a second chance are viewed by "the rest of us", right?

So here's some practical ideas for you to put your faith into action tonight. That first one I want to start with is labels. When people are in the justice system, they lose their identity. They become inmates, offenders, and even after they've paid their debt, their identity is not restored in our languages is it? We call them ex-offenders, felon, convict. It's a perpetual scarlet letter. And language is powerful and it really does change the way we see people in different

circumstances. I mean, think of how today we actually call people, people with disabilities. There's a reason for that, right? And I introduce my boss who's in recovery as a person in recovery. If I'm talking about that context of his life, right? I don't say he's an ex addict. There's a reason for that.

These labels come with changes in how we view people. And so whether someone is behind bars or has a criminal record, I would ask the church, aren't we all children at the foot of the cross? Amen. Amen. So it may take a few extra words to say people in prison or someone with a criminal record or returning citizen, but we can make a difference through our language. And I think it's one powerful thing that we can all do right now.

The next thing I want to talk about is social media. Or actually, let's go back here, engaging in the public square. Because culture is what really changes the law. We need the church to step into the public square and if each of us would just take hold of the opportunities that we have that are amazing in this democracy to be part of it, we can't see change. So please, if you haven't already, I encourage you to register to vote, learn about your elected officials, actually go to their website, see what their platforms are, attend some of their campaign events, ask hard questions. And make sure you're voting in every election, not just the presidential election. Been working on that with my husband for years now. We're getting there.

And here's a track to making that last one easy. You can actually sign up for advocacy alerts at [prisonfellowship.org/advocacyalerts](http://prisonfellowship.org/advocacyalerts) so that you can respond to your legislators once they're elected about how you feel about different criminal justice issues. We'll send you updates of what's happening in Congress in your state and you can link to our advocacy platform. You literally put in your name, your zip code, it'll identify who your legislator is. We'll have a pre-filled out letter, you can change it if you'd like to. We encourage you to do so. But you can literally send it in under a minute. Even my mom does it and she tells me it's really easy which is pretty amazing for someone who still like sends me email on my Facebook page. So we can all do that.

In terms of social media, in the 21st century, some might say you are what you share. Social media platforms give us the ability to immediately spread the word about what you care about with your friends and family. Also gives us the ability to follow people, follow organizations. I know many of our speakers tonight have a Twitter handle or places where you can follow what they're doing and hear about the research. I'd encourage you to look those up. Prison fellowship uses at justice reform to share news and stories related to justice reform. And in case you haven't noticed, Twitter has also become an increasingly popular channel for political discourse. So, follow your elected officials and let them know what you want and what criminal justice reform, why it matters to you.

And here's what you can do right now. Even this evening. I want to invite you to take action by signing the Justice declaration. The Justice declaration's a statement of principles calling the church to prison ministry and justice reform. We launched this in June. It's signed by over 100 prominent Christian leaders, including Ravi Zacharias, Russell Moore, Karen Swanson, Dr.

Trulear and we invite all Christians to add your name. You can read the declaration, listen to the video at [justicedeclaration.org](http://justicedeclaration.org). We also have it available outside the booth just to the left at prison fellowship for you to sign online or hard copies to sign.

I'm sorry, I keep clicking, huh? Okay. And if you sign the justice declaration tonight at the booth, prison fellowship would like to give you a free copy of *Outrageous Justice*. This is our Bible study curriculum for small groups. It's a great opportunity to keep the conversations and things you're learning about tonight, going with your campus, with your church with your community. There're six lessons. There's a video teachings with real life stories from people and there's also an accompanying book. You can read that on its own or as part of your group.

I know I got the opportunity to do this with my own church and use our curriculum and we had people who kind of came out of the word work, who were returned citizens. And it was just awesome to meet them and be able to talk about how we as a church body could do more. Some of the lessons cover things like victim care, the re-entry process and collateral consequences, sentencing reform as well, as direct ministry to people while they're in prison and care for families.

And I know it's a little early to be thinking Spring in April, but I want to make sure this is on your radar. April is second chance month. It's all about raising awareness of the challenges that people with a criminal record face and how all of us can be part of unlocking second chances. As I mentioned, in 2017, we saw the US senate and some states pass resolutions or have proclamations and we think that, that's going to keep happening in 2018. But more than those resolutions, we want to see the church step up and engage. Being a leading voice for second chances. There's a variety of ways you could get involved or ask your church to get involved.

For the last couple of years, we've been doing a second chance 5K in Minnesota. We do one in the community and at the same time we have three prisons who actually host the 5K inside the walls and the staff at the prisons actually hand out water, set up the course, it's just awesome. And we want to make that opportunity available to everyone. So we're going to have a second chance virtual 5K. So you can print off your bib, we'll send you a medal and you can do it on your treadmill or run around Wheaton. However you see fit. We also have a tool kit that churches in small groups can use to host a second chance Sunday. We have some social media tools. All sorts of things. I encourage you to check out the website [prisonfellowship.org/second-chance-month](http://prisonfellowship.org/second-chance-month) and keep checking back. We'll keep updating it as April gets closer.

And, then last but not least, I'd encourage you to think about becoming a justice advocate. If you're here tonight and you think, "I can take another step beyond to really get out and change the systems." We have a program. We have resources and training tools that we provide that demonstrate for people how they can host events on their campus or in their church or in the community. To get people talking like we've done here tonight. Set up petition drives, write letters to the editor. We just had one of our justice advocates who's formerly incarcerated youth publishing his own letter to the editor in Virginia just this last week.

And we also teach people how to build personal relationships with their legislators. They really do want to hear from you. We've had plenty of our justice advocates convince their legislators to co-sponsor legislation like the second chance act.

So the website's available if you want to check that out, [prisonfellowship.org/action](http://prisonfellowship.org/action) and just select justice reform as your interest or come see us at the booth outside just to the left.

So these are just a few of the ways that you can actually engage in changing the system. Being for justice reform and I hope you feel equipped to get started or to deepen the current engagement you have because one voice at a time and one story at a time, we really can change the culture. And when we change the culture, then we can change the law. Thank you.