

Lutheran Episcopal Advocacy Ministry of New Jersey
Weekly Witness | June 15, 2017

In this week's text we hear an account of Jesus sending his disciples into the world to continue his ministry of healing, teaching, and proclaiming that the Kingdom of Heaven has come near. In Matthew's account we read, "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." Matthew is clear that "the world" is not necessarily a welcoming place. Having been touched by Jesus's life, he knows God's power and reign are present in a world where sin, disease, and hardship exists at the same time.

We, too, know this world, filled with joy and sorrow, and we are raising our children here. Every day we experience the gifts of God--a beautiful sunrise, a nice walk to the train, the satisfaction of a good day's work, and the joy of arriving back home at the end of the day. But we also hear sirens outside, and know sadness when we read of another ill family member or learn of another mass shooting. Teaching our children how to navigate both of these realities requires a village of faithful support.

Children and youth [are not](#) little adults, as once thought long ago; they are unique and developing children of God who need our special care. When our children make a wrong decision, are impulsive, or commit a crime, we can hear Matthew's words ("sending you out like sheep in the midst of wolves"). Our children can get caught in snares of this world because it is full of temptation, injustice, and difficult decisions.

The solution to wrong decisions is not to incarcerate our youth. Rather, we should commit to helping raise them with wisdom and with kindness. [Youth Justice New Jersey](#) is an organization that has as its mission a tripartite decarceration campaign:

1. Further reduce the number of youth incarcerated in New Jersey's juvenile justice facilities;
2. Decrease racial and ethnic disparities; and
3. Redirect resources towards effective community-based restorative alternatives to incarceration for youth.

According to a recent [report](#), black children are arrested at higher rates than white children, and law enforcement officers less frequently "divert" the cases of black children to non-jail options, such as ordering community service or payment of restitution to the victim. "Put simply, this means that black kids are disproportionately arrested, are not getting diverted, and, as a result, are being incarcerated in lopsided numbers," the report reads. The authors also found that it cost NJ taxpayers \$196,133 per child to operate the state's juvenile correctional facilities in 2014, arguing that community-based programs are cheaper and more effective.

Later this month, on June 28, 2017, a campaign is being launched to say: **150 years is enough!**

We are lifting our collective voices to transform New Jersey's youth incarceration system into a community-based system of care by closing the state's girls youth prison (Hayes) and the largest youth prison for boys (Jamesburg). We have a lot of work to do before then, and we need your partnership. Join the campaign [here](#).

You can also encourage your faith community to become a part of [Faith Justice New Jersey](#), a coalition organized by the Institute for Social Justice. With your help, we will work alongside our brothers and sisters of faith to build strong and healthy urban communities with child-centered alternatives to incarceration. We envision a New Jersey where no child is imprisoned. Please join us in this righteous battle by clicking [here](#) to join Faith Justice New Jersey.

Let us strengthen this village of support by advocating for all of God's children. As we go, may we proclaim the good news: "The kingdom of heaven has come near."