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OPINION

Tragic Mass Incarceration and Exploitation

Breaking the chains of injustice

BY M. LINDA JARAMILLO



Each year over 1,000 Christians join together in our nation's capital to address a common issue facing our communities. This year, Ecumenical Advocacy Days for Global Peace with Justice focused on the theme, "Breaking the Chains: Mass Incarceration and Systems of Exploitation." The United Church of Christ was proud to be one of the sponsors in this powerful movement of faithful people who are united in this bold public action to influence policy makers on Capitol Hill.

In addition to our partnership with Ecumenical Advocacy Days, the gathering earlier this month of leaders in the United

Church of Christ addressed our nation's tragic mass incarceration system of injustice that disproportionately impacts black and brown men.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, the United States imprisons more of its own people than any other country in the world. While

million people currently subject to the U.S. criminal justice system, and it is far from representative of the nation's population as a whole. For instance, while African American males comprise only 6 percent of the U.S. population, they make up 40 percent of those in prison or jail. African American males

fabric of our families and communities, it is an expensive drain of our public resources that would be better directed to quality public education.

Estimates indicate that unduplicated expenditures to maintain the prison industrial complex are \$300 billion per year. The burden of such ex-

ing suppliers of goods and services.

As a business, the first priority of private companies is profit; therefore, income for private prisons depends entirely on maintaining a large and stable inmate population. But the demand for guaranteed occupancy rates runs counter to efforts toward early release, alternative sentencing, and other forms of restitution, especially in cases of non-violent crimes.

United Church of Christ is mobilizing our members to a growing movement of faith and community organizations to halt the rapidly rising trend of mass incarceration. We must dismantle the new caste system it has created by breaking the chains of injustice before another generation is lost.

The Rev. M. Linda Jaramillo is executive minister for the United Church of Christ's Justice and Witness Ministries.

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the U.S. comprises 5 percent of the total global population; it alone accounts for a staggering 25 percent of the world's prison population.

All totaled, there are over 7

have a 32 percent chance of serving time at some point in their lives, while white males have only a 6 percent chance.

Besides the cost to the human spirit which tears at the

penditures has led to the increasing privatization of that complex, especially in rural areas with small populations, where there is a need for jobs and other commerce, includ-

Imperative Call to Take Our Health Seriously

Having a heart to serve

BY VIVIAN M. LUCAS



Lori, a 41-year-old African-American mother of two, had completed a successful but stressful business trip. As she arrived home, she realized that she had driven 45 minutes from the airport, stopped to pick up her young sons from her mother's, and was feeling more tired than usual.

Her initial departing flight home had been late. She had to run through the airport to make the connecting flight. Still, Lori was already thinking about the next night's community meeting about voter education. Thinking ahead, she was wondering how many layers of warm clothing she would need to wear during the annual march for justice at the state capital. She began calculating the amount of time she needed to leave home to make the hour-long drive to the march's

gathering site, while also pondering where she needed to park her car.

Lori had a heart for justice. Yet there it was again, a sharp pain in her back.

"It's probably from pulling overstuffed luggage," Lori thought. She had felt a little nausea on the plane — "I just need some fresh air," she tried to reassure herself. But when she woke up in the emergency room at the local hospital of her town, she knew she was in trouble. She had a bad habit of postponing her annual doctor appointments. She was unaware of her health challenges. Her doctor informed her that she had cardiovascular disease and that she had just suffered a heart attack.

As active as Lori had been — building her career, taking care of her family, supporting her community, and fighting for justice — she had neglected to take care of herself and her heart. She did not know a silent killer was on the loose inside of

her own body.

Lori was blessed to survive this major health crisis. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, every day, 2,200 Americans die from cardiovascular disease — that's nearly one in every three deaths.

While anyone can be at risk for heart disease and stroke, almost half of all African-American adults have some form of cardiovascular disease that can lead to heart attack, stroke, heart failure, coronary artery disease, and/or other serious conditions. Major risk factors include genetics, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, obesity, smoking, and lack of exercise. African Americans have the highest rate of death from heart disease and stroke than any other racial or ethnic group in this country.

Like Lori, many of us work hard in our jobs, with our families, and in our communities. Many of us lift up our voices, walking the paths to make sure that the call for justice is an-

swered. However, we often neglect to combat the adversary that has the greatest potential to silence our voices, tie our hands and still our steps forever — heart disease.

It is imperative that we take our health seriously. We must visit with our doctors, exercise our bodies, eat healthily, and work within our communities to stop the threat caused by cardiovascular disease.

We must recognize that poor health can lead to diminished

productivity in the workplace, more health challenges, and yes, even death! Heart disease is too high a cost to pay.

In many communities, the quest for justice is long; it takes a toll. While it is important to honor one's heart to serve, we must also try to keep ourselves healthy so that we can remain in the struggle until the end.

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