

Connections



A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Thinking about prisons and prisoners



Several recent newspaper articles have made me think about how our society treats the people who are convicted of crimes. I read about Kathleen Soliah, for example, a violent terrorist in the 1970's. She had avoided the police and F.B.I. until last summer, and during those years she became a wife and mother and an active member of a United Methodist Church. When she was finally found and arrested last June, she was put in jail to await trial. I wonder why. I'm not sure there's any need to keep her in prison now.



Her many current friends, a news article says, describe her as an utterly nonviolent person who favors gun control, reads to the blind, and often cooks dinners for worthy fund-raising projects and large groups of homeless people. She was arrested on her way to teach citizenship and English as a Second Language at a community center where she has volunteered for years.



Other recent articles speculate about what should happen to an eleven-year-old murderer. Others tell of a man who after serving years in prison for rape was released recently when DNA evidence showed his conviction to have been a mistake. Still other news reports describe the verbal and physical abuse that evidently is often heaped on prisoners by other prisoners and sometimes by guards, and on guards by the prisoners they're responsible for.



Can our faith give answers?

Can our faith help us to see what love and justice require with regard to dealing with crime and prisons and prisoners? Do we need to be discussing this problem and seeking answers in church?

The death penalty—right or wrong?

Even among Christians there's plenty of disagreement about capital punishment. Some arguments for it claim to be merely practical. These say that capital punishment is the only reliable way of keeping violent criminals from committing more crimes, because life sentences often don't last for life.

Let the groans of the prisoners come before you; according to your great power preserve those doomed to die.

—Psalm 79:11



Too expensive? A deterrent?

Advocates of capital punishment say, too, that society shouldn't have to pay the monetary cost of supporting criminals for life, when for the same or a lesser cost we could educate law-abiding citizens at top-notch universities. This argument evidently doesn't hold water, however, because the required appeal process takes years and costs a lot of money just as supporting a prisoner for life does.

Another argument for capital punishment claims that it deters people from crime. Opponents say it doesn't. However, even if it doesn't deter anyone else, it definitely deters the criminal who is executed.



What do love and justice require?

If someone is executed and then found to have been wrongly convicted, the mistake can't be corrected. That's a very important reason for not using the death penalty. Also, killing criminals means stooping to their level and adding to the violence in society, rather than demonstrating a better way. Jesus advocated following the law of love instead of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Arguments against the death penalty therefore seem to outweigh the arguments in favor of it.



The line between right and wrong on this subject may seem a bit fuzzy, but saying no to the death penalty is evidently what God calls Christians to do.

I believe we do. I was surprised and disappointed several months ago at the negative reaction of some church members when the pastor of my church mentioned the subject in a sermon.

I live in the state that executes more people than any other state, and at that time a referendum was coming up, about whether Texas should continue using the death penalty. My pastor said he believed that Christians should oppose it. That's the official position of the United Methodist Church (*Book of Discipline* ¶ 68F), so it shouldn't be surprising for a United Methodist clergyman to express support for it. However, some church-member friends said to me, "Wasn't it terrible of _____ to talk about capital punishment in his sermon! That has no place in church."



A subject we need to talk and hear about



I had to disagree. I'm not sure whether capital punishment is ever justified, but I feel quite sure that talking about it in church not only is justified but is actually important for us to do. What

issue could be more pertinent to Christian faith than the question of whether taking someone's life is permissible? No matter which side of the capital punishment issue we happen to be on, we must see that there's a possibility of conflict between the Ten Commandments' "you shall not kill," and our society's practice of legally killing people in certain circumstances. What could be a more appropriate setting than the church for trying to discern God's will about such issues, in which our claimed beliefs and our society's accepted practices seem different?



If we avoid considering such issues in the church, we're neglecting part of the church's God-given purpose. Merely reassuring churchgoers that their present beliefs are right, as many sermons and Sunday School lessons do, is nowhere near as important as challenging hearers to examine their beliefs about life-and-death issues and about whether their society's policies in regard to such issues are just.

What should our aims be?



Maybe the way to start examining the relation of our Christian beliefs to society's policies regarding crime is to consider what penalties for crime need to accomplish. Some of our methods seem to aim mainly at revenge, and I doubt that's ever justified. Is punishment a valid aim? Punishing criminals in an effort to discourage them from committing more crimes after release from prison may be somewhat useful, but I doubt that it should be our main goal.

What about paying a debt to society? When we make that our goal, society often seems to do most of the paying, whether it's in money or in the additional crimes committed by former prisoners who in prison merely became angrier and more skilled at crime and didn't become any more able to cope with the outside world. So what should our aims be, in our policies toward crime, prisons, and prisoners?

• Avoiding conviction of innocent people

Above all, our methods need to avoid convicting innocent people. This means, among other things, seeing that accused people have compe-



A surprising coincidence

When I first thought about writing in *Connections* about how our use of prisons might relate to Christian faith, I wasn't at all sure that what I was considering saying would be usable. I wasn't even sure it was enough to fill a whole issue. Besides, I have almost no first-hand experience with prisons to report, and I didn't think mere statistics would be interesting. I started writing a tentative draft to help me decide whether to pursue the subject.



While writing that first draft I brought in the day's mail. In it was a note from a *Connections* reader, a United Methodist clergyman. To my surprise he mentioned that he was now spending a lot of time visiting his daughter in prison. He also said that since his retirement he and his wife had been doing prison ministry. I had known this man slightly for several years, but I had no inkling of his having any connection with prisons. When his letter came in the midst of my uncertainty about what to write, I decided maybe I was meant to write about prisons after all.





tent legal assistance and that factors such as race and poverty don't cause mistaken convictions. A just system would also provide for correcting mistakes as quickly as possible.

• **Protecting potential victims**

In my view, the number-one aim of society's treatment of criminals should be keeping additional people from becoming the criminals' victims. Accomplishing this is often seen as a reason for killing the most dangerous criminals, but if killing is morally wrong we must use another way. We tend to think that keeping these criminals in prisons or mental institutions for life is the only other reliable way.

For some criminals, however, imprisonment even for a short time seems pointless. Physical confinement seems unnecessary to protect society from people who haven't been physically violent, such as embezzlers or perjurers. Couldn't we save prison space and costs, and still keep these criminals from victimizing anyone else, by simply denying them the future right to handle other people's money or to hold public office?



• **Rehabilitating criminals**

A major goal in our treatment of prisoners, it seems, should be rehabilitating them so that they won't have to be kept in prison forever but neither will they be dangerous when they get out. If that were our aim, it seems, our methods of dealing with prisoners would change. We would furnish full-time education in prison for all inmates who are mentally able, and we would make participation compulsory. We would provide therapy and spiritual guidance. We might even surround inmates with top-quality music, art, and books. Certainly



ly able, and we would make participation compulsory. We would provide therapy and spiritual guidance. We might even surround inmates with top-quality music, art, and books. Certainly

we'd deny them access to entertainment that promoted violence, substance abuse, or other harmful behavior. We would make release dependent on having become competent in reading and in other basic skills and behaviors needed for productive, law-abiding life in the outside world.



Doing these things would be costly, of course, but maybe a lot less costly than our present policy of not doing them. Providing and requiring real rehabilitation would not only be the compassionate thing to do. It might also give society the greatest protection.



If turning criminals into law-abiding, productive members of society were our aim, there would be no real reason to imprison someone like Kathleen Soliah, who evidently has already become law-abiding, productive, and no longer dangerous.

We can visit, minister, pay, vote, speak

Whatever our views may be about changes that our system may need, however, what should we do about the people who are currently in prisons? We can visit them. We can pray for them. We can minister



When the Son of Man comes in his glory ... he will separate people ... [He] will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you ... for I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when ... ?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

—Matthew 25:31-40

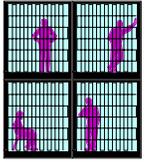
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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make regular financial contributions, but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some non-churchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

ter to their families, especially to their children, who often suffer most from a parent's imprisonment.

If we lack the gifts and calling for doing prison-related ministries personally, we can at least help to make them available. We can support some of the many local, regional, or nationwide organizations, or programs within our churches, which provide much-needed prison ministries.



Our voices and votes in church and civic decision-making bodies can help, too. We need to promote changes that will make innocent people less likely

to be convicted, and will make criminals more likely to be rehabilitated and returned safely to society.



Obviously I'm no authority on prisons. I'm offering my thoughts only in the hope that they might help you examine your own and see how you might help our society find better ways of dealing with prisons and prisoners. We need to keep looking for God's will on this difficult subject. Talking about it in our churches is a good way to start.

Barbara

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- √ If you read it on your screen instead of printing it, it saves paper
- √ You can still have it on paper by printing it
- √ You receive it when I send it, not days or weeks later
- √ Many of the pictures are in color
- √ Even if you cancel delivery of mail when you're away, you still get *Connections*
- √ I save on printing, paper, and labeling.



To get *Connections* by e-mail, e-mail me and let me know you want it—BCWendland@aol.com.

If you get *Connections* from the web ...

If you've looked for issues of *Connections* on the web recently, you may have had trouble finding them. Issues from Sept. '98 through Dec. '99 are still on the Wisconsin UMC web site, but they're at <http://www.wisconsinumc.org/connections>, and the links from my site didn't lead there. Now they do.



From now on, complete issues will be on my own site, <http://www.vvm.com/~bcwendland>. Correct links to the earlier issues are also there now. If you're using the automatic e-mail reminder system to find out when each new issue appears, and you want to keep getting those reminders, I suggest that you enter your e-mail address in the Mind-it box on my site.



I'm sorry about this confusion, but I think I now have my web set-up working right.