



Juvenile Justice Week of Faith and Healing

Faith Leader Engagement Toolkit

Table of Contents

Page 2 – Introduction

Page 3 – Finding People of Faith

Page 4 – Sample Introduction letter

Page 5 – Tools for Faith Leaders

Page 6 – Sample Bulletin

Page 7 – Activities

Page 8 – Contact Information

Page 9 – Faith Community Involvement

Introduction

Thank you for raising awareness about the Juvenile Justice Week of Faith and Healing (JJWFH). The JJWFH (March 5-11) was originally started in California by the Healing Justice Coalition. According to its founders,

Juvenile Justice Week of Faith and Healing is an annual event ...The week is a time to open our hearts and minds through prayer, education, service, and advocacy. The events through the week will initiate a dialogue between offenders, victims, and the community regarding the causes of crime and will suggest structures needed to prevent youth from becoming engaged in the cycle of violence. The long term goal of Juvenile Justice Week of Faith and Healing is to offer young offenders hope and alternatives to a lifetime as a hardened criminal, while society implements more fully the principles of restorative justice.¹

Faith communities around the country are participating in this important effort. This toolkit is designed for **juvenile justice advocates who hope to engage local faith communities** during the Juvenile Justice Week of Faith and Healing. As you think about possible faith leaders in your community, please take a moment to review the contents of this packet.

The third page, *Finding People of Faith*, provides **information on how to effectively identify potential faith leaders**—whether they are in your own faith community or one that you are seeking to engage for the first time.

After you have located faith communities, the fourth page, *Sample Introduction Letter*, can be used to **introduce the JJWFH to a prospective leader**.

Once you have made contact with faith leaders, the next page, *Tools for Faith Leaders*, provides **resources** that they can **give directly to their community members**. Among those resources is the *Sample Bulletin* on the following page.

The *Activities* page offers a **number of different ways to use the week** as a chance to engage faith leaders.

Any faith leaders interested in becoming more involved in advocating for youth, put in touch with Andrew Cevalco (information listed on the *Contact Information* page).

Finally, the last page, *Faith Community Involvement*, provides a way for you to **keep track of faith communities** that advocate on behalf of youth serving life without parole sentences. You should keep track of these communities for future engagement.

¹ Healing Justice Coalition, *Juvenile Justice Week of Faith and Healing* (www.healingjusticecoalition.org/juvenile_justice_week.html)

Finding People of Faith

Your Faith Community

- *Talk with your own faith leader* – the JJWFH provides the perfect opportunity to begin a conversation about youth sentencing in your own community. **Try to schedule a meeting** with your faith leader to discuss the week and activities to undertake
- *Post a bulletin in your faith community* – If you are not able to talk with your faith leader, post the bulletin attached below in your place of worship to inform your faith community about juvenile justice. **Include your contact information and try to gather a group for discussion.**

Finding a Faith Community

- *Search online for social justice based faith communities* – a quick search on Google can provide you with a list of faith communities and faith leaders to contact in your area. Keywords to consider in your search:
 - *Prison Ministry* – faith organizations that work with prison ministry are often receptive to messaging regarding youth sentencing.
 - *Homeless Shelter* – faith-based organizations that provide services to the homeless recognize the importance of working for people that society has marginalized. These communities may also be willing to talk about JJWFH
 - *LGBT Community* – faith communities that are welcoming to the LGBT community are often open to other progressive movements such as prison and sentencing reform.
- *Search online for youth groups* – look for local youth-based organizations such as faith youth groups or afterschool programs. Young people are valuable energetic allies. Share information about the JJWFH with their leaders and ask them to do the same with their youth.
- *Michelle Alexander* – has written a new book entitled “The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness.” She has also been on a speaking tour. See if she has spoken at faith communities in your area—these organizations would likely be interested in learning more about the JJWFH.

Sample Introduction Letter

Use this as a form letter/e-mail or as a guide for a phone conversation with a faith leader

[Date]

Dear [Name of Faith Leader],

My name is [your name], and I am writing to you to inform you about the Juvenile Justice Week of Faith and Healing (JJWFH) which takes place March 5th-11th. [If appropriate mention your association with the faith community, i.e. "My name is Daniel and I have been a member for 11 years"]. It is an opportunity to join faith communities across the country in prayer, service, and action.

The United States is the only country in the world that sentences youth to life without the possibility of parole. There are more than 2,500 youth who have been given this sentence and condemned to die in prison in the United States, but none in the rest of the world. Most of these individuals had no prior records and committed these crimes alongside adult co-defendants, many of whom received lesser sentences. African American youth are sentenced to life without parole at a per capita rate that is *10 times* that of white youth.

Common sense and science tell us that children are not simply little adults. Their brains—not just their bodies—are not yet fully developed. They do not have adult levels of judgment or ability to assess risks, and they are more susceptible to peer pressure than adults. Because of their unique characteristics as youth, they are also especially amenable to rehabilitation and capable of reforming their behavior.

Our faith tells us that children should not be judged for the rest of their lives based on their greatest failures. As people of faith, we have a moral responsibility to advocate for the most vulnerable in our society—even those convicted of serious crimes. Our society should uphold our children's dignity and human rights, rather than discard them for life. Young people should be held accountable for harm they have caused in an age-appropriate way with a focus on rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

The JJWFH is an annual event that was designed to raise awareness about, and inspire action around juvenile justice policies that undermine our faith. During this week congregations of all faith traditions unite across the country to educate and advocate on behalf of children, families, and communities impacted by these unjust policies. I would like to invite you, and your faith community to join us in prayer and service this week.

Enclosed in this letter is a list of activities and ways in which your [our] congregation can get involved. I will be able to provide you with any additional materials that may be helpful to participate in the week.

Thank you for considering this invitation to participate in the Juvenile Justice Week of Faith and Healing. Please contact me at the following phone number (XXX) XXX – XXXX, or write back to me at the following address: XXXXXXX@xxx.xxx

Thank you,

[Your Name]

Tools for Faith Leaders

Fast facts about life without parole for youth:

- There are 2,500 youth serving life without the possibility of parole in the United States. There are none in the rest of the world.
- Life without parole is a sentence to die in prison. There is no hope of ever being released.
- Sentencing youth to life without the possibility of parole sends an unequivocal message that they are beyond redemption.
- The United States and Somalia are the only two countries in the world that have not ratified the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which prohibits sentencing youth to life without parole.
- Evidence from behavioral and child development research concludes that young people who commit crimes are more likely to reform their behavior and have a better chance at rehabilitation than adults.
- Incarcerating a youth for life costs taxpayers an average of \$1,540,311. Nationally we spend approximately \$65 million per year incarcerating youth with life without parole sentences.
- On average across the country, black youth are serving life without parole at a per capita rate that is 10 times that of white youth.
- An estimated 59 percent of people serving life without parole sentences for crimes committed as youth received the sentence for their first-ever offense

For sample sermons and prayers which mention juvenile justice, either follow these links or see the attached documents

For a Jewish Prayer:

http://healingjusticecoalition.org/documents/Jewish_Prayer.pdf

For an Islamic Prayer:

http://healingjusticecoalition.org/documents/Islamic_Sermon.pdf

For Christian Prayers:

http://healingjusticecoalition.org/documents/Prayers_of_Faithful_Christian.pdf

http://healingjusticecoalition.org/documents/Prayer_for_Justice.pdf

Sample Bulletin

Juvenile Justice Week of Faith & Healing

The *Healing Justice Coalition* invites you to take part in the *Juvenile Justice Week of Faith & Healing* (JJWFH) March 5-11. The JJWFH serves as an opportunity to unite congregations of all faith traditions nationwide to raise awareness of individual, community, and social needs arising from the current justice system's impact on youth. The week is a time to open our hearts and minds through prayer, education, service, and advocacy.

There are 2,500 youth serving life sentences without the possibility of parole in the United States, and none in the rest of the world. Life without parole for youth is a sentence to die in prison. Most of these individuals had no prior records and committed these crimes alongside adult co-defendants, many of whom received lesser sentences. African American youth are sentenced to life without parole at a per capita rate that is 10 times that of white youth. In many states, life without parole is imposed on children as a mandatory minimum sentence, giving no discretion to the judge or jury to consider factors like the age of the youth, any history of abuse/neglect, or prior record.

Sentencing youth to life without parole imposes an irrevocable judgment that these youth are beyond hope or redemption. All children—even those convicted of serious crimes—deserve to have a second chance at life. Instead of sentencing youth to life in prison without parole, they should be held accountable in an age-appropriate way, with a focus on rehabilitation and reintegration into society. This alternative reflects the human dignity of our children that we, as people of faith, are called to protect.

The Juvenile Justice Week of Faith & Healing is an opportunity to take action and raise awareness about juvenile justice issues and the practice of sentencing youth to life without the possibility of parole. Please consider taking action in some of the ways listed below.

5 ways to take action

1. **Join advocates calling for just alternatives.** The Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth is a national coalition working to end the practice of sentencing youth to life without parole. We believe that young people convicted of serious crimes should be held accountable for the harm they have caused in an age-appropriate way. We believe in fair sentencing for youth that reflects our human rights, values and moral beliefs and the fundamental difference between youth and adults. Support our statement of principles or use it to find local organizations that support the fair sentencing of youth:
www.fairsentencingofyouth.org/home/statement-of-principles/
2. **Support legislation to eliminate life sentences for youth.** Many states have legislation that would roll back life sentences for young people. Contact the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth to find out if your state is active and how you can help. Email: info@fairsentencingofyouth.org
3. **Support alternative programs** that offer positive opportunities to young people – athletics, faith-based sponsored after-school events, tutoring, and literacy programs.
4. **Contact your federal representatives.** Ask them to ratify the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.
For more information see: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>
5. **Begin the conversation** within your community about the manner in which we treat youth convicted of crimes in the United States.

For more information on the Juvenile Justice Week of Faith and Healing,
including resources and information go to :

[http://healingjusticecoalition.org/juvenile_justice_week.html]

For more information on the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth go to:
www.fairsentencingofyouth.org • email: info@fairsentencingofyouth.org

Editor's note: The *Healing Justice Coalition* is a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, economically diverse coalition of faith-based organizations that provide support for and advocate on behalf of children and families. Its membership includes Protestants of several denominations, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Mormons, Buddhists and Sikhs

Activities

- *Place a bulletin* in your faith organization's newsletter
- *Discuss juvenile justice* in your weekly faith service [see attached document]
- *Post a flyer* in your place of worship [see attached document]
- *Host a candle-light vigil in your faith community* by speaking with your faith leader about the possibility of having an event in remembrances of youth in the justice system.
- *Host a discussion* after a faith service in your community about juvenile justice and sentencing youth to life without parole.
- *Write a letter* to your local representatives asking them to repeal harsh youth sentencing practices
- *Support neighborhood groups* that work to create cooperative relationships between neighbors, faith communities, and law enforcement to create a safe and secure community.
- *Support or volunteer* with programs that promote victim ministry in your place of worship.
- *Support or volunteer* with the ministry at your local detention center.
- *Provide spiritual, material, or emotional* assistance to those re-entering society, both youth and adult.

For any additional questions or comments please contact:

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Keep track of faith communities you work with for future engagement

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