



# Hearing the Cries for Justice

Hearing the Cries for Justice was a three-year partnership between Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon (EMO) and the Episcopal Bishop of Oregon Foundation, Episcopal Diocese of Oregon (EDO) and the Episcopal Diocese of Eastern Oregon, running from 2017-2020.

## Summary Report

<b>I.</b>	<b>Reflection on the Partnership</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II.</b>	<b>Deliverables: What we've done</b>	
	<b>A. Hearing the Cries for Justice (annual convocations)</b>	<b>2</b>
	<b>B. Community Engagement and Ongoing Advocacy</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>III.</b>	<b>Future: Where we go from here</b>	<b>6</b>

---

## I. Reflection on the Partnership

Over the course of three years, the relationship between the Episcopal Diocese of Oregon and Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon has been deepened. EMO remains incredibly grateful for the trust and faith placed in us for the gift of this partnership.

The Rev. Deacon Tom English (of EDO) and The Rev. Audrey Zunkel-deCoursey (of EMO) were in close contact throughout the administration of this partnership, ensuring a synchronicity of goals and process. The EMO programs benefited from the generous support and mentorship of Deacon Tom, with his decades of experience in jail chaplaincy and reform advocacy, and from

the Prison Ministry Commission's commitment to support the broad range of ministries within the scope of this field.

This program was able to take a different shape than some EMO programs, because it was less bound by narrow requirements as some grants entail. This allowed the program to be responsive and creative, generating the potential for new models in the future. In particular, this program spanned the range from traditional event planning to member outreach on to engaging public policy for reform. In this way, the program was able to move within the "issue" of criminal justice to meet the broad array of ways congregations and people of faith can engage the issue.

Recently, the world-changing Black Lives Matter protests in response to the systemic racist violence by law enforcement against African-Americans have raised widespread awareness of the racism built in the U.S. criminal justice system. While protests have focused more on policing, the whole legal system disproportionately harms Black people and communities, including incarceration and reentry, the areas of focus of our organization. We grieve every way our legal system harms people and community. The brokenness of our supposed justice system is evident. We are awed by the spirit moving through this movement. We hope it continues to motivate white people especially to look at every space for advancing justice, from corrections to policing to healthcare to education. All people have the capacity to work within their spheres of influence, whether that be at work or in their community, to work for racial equity and justice.

As we will mention more in the closing section, criminal justice issues are ones that have the potential to build bridges across geographic and political boundaries, in a way that few other issues do in our polarized society. We learned that EMO's mission can be well lived out in continuing to engage this issue and the diverse communities impacted by it.

---

## **II. Deliverables: What we've done**

### **A. Hearing the Cries for Justice (annual convocations)**

#### **SUMMARY**

*Hearing the Cries for Justice Annual Convocation* was comprised of a series of three summits to bring together people of faith for information, inspiration and training to engage in ministries with people impacted by the criminal justice system. The specific emphasis of each summit was to equip and motivate faith communities to offer meaningful engagement in two arenas:

- hospitality for persons returning from prison
- advocacy for positive reforms to the justice system

## **VISION for Hearing the Cries for Justice Summits**

The vision of each summit was to bring a holistic lens to ministries with our justice-involved neighbors, helping people of faith and goodwill “get proximate” (in the words of Bryan Stevenson) with those members of our society who have lived experience of the justice system. We hoped to frame participants’ understanding of the “issue” of criminal justice as a matter of faith—one they are compelled to act on.

We used a restorative justice lens to work toward a goal of healing: strengthening individuals for resilience and hope, naming and grieving the depths of harm experienced, seeking to prevent harm when possible, and restoring right relationships, as appropriate.

As people of faith, we know that our communities bring together people beyond the labels placed on us by the justice system and wider society: we are more than “victims,” “offenders,” or “community members” —we may be all three—and our congregations certainly have all these people within them. But the ways the justice system brings people together (and keeps them separate) are different from the ways that a faith community brings people together. How are we to live together as a community? How do we resolve the inherent “conflict” in this existence as one body of many distinct members?

Specifically, these summits sought to empower the community to take its place in the Restorative Justice movement, stepping up to the responsibilities it has to those in the roles of “offender” and “victim,” and taking accountability for the harm community has perpetrated and perpetuated. These harms include those enacted through the existence of a justice system that distances people from their neighbors and adds layers of harm instead of resolving conflict in a pro-social, just way.

These summits recognized a theology of **interconnection and interdependence**. Our need for one another, in mutually beneficial and healing relationships, happens to be at the core of pro-social thinking, as well. Further, we recognized the interconnection of “issues” (as society sees them and separates them) in that criminal justice issues are interwoven with public health concerns, homelessness and housing inaccessibility, human trafficking, trauma, recovery, immigration and more. We are one community of many members, facing diverse but interrelated challenges, holding within us unique seeds of hope and resilience with one shared future.

## **SUMMIT OVERVIEW**

In order to make this accessible to all, costs for attendance were structured, providing free entrance for formerly incarcerated persons or anyone facing economic hardship and a discounted rate for students and teachers.

The agenda for the day included an opening keynote panel addressing the full body, highlighting diverse voices and sharing perspectives from lived experience of the justice system. Former prison inmates, staff and crime survivors shared their stories and, in so doing, showed that no individual embodies a single label within the justice system.

The morning and afternoon continued with break-out workshops led by local leaders to provide in-depth training in two tracks:

- Tools for ministries of support and accountability for neighbors returning from prison.
- Public policy advocacy for reform, connecting the work of direct ministry to the systems change that will benefit whole populations.

A closing plenary and a packet of resources allowed participants to come away from the summit prepared to continue learning and making a difference.

### **GOALS of the summits**

1. INSPIRE participants about the need and their ability to take action for criminal justice reform;
2. EDUCATE attendees about mass incarceration, the prison reentry process, navigating correctional and parole/probation services, and experiences of survivors of violence;
3. MOTIVATE participants to take action in public policy advocacy and/or in any number of the existing prison and reentry support projects across Oregon;
4. EQUIP convocation attendees, and thereby their communities, to provide effective support and accountability to persons impacted by the legal system;
5. STRENGTHEN a network of communities committed to working for justice and serving with compassion.

### **Year One: Jan. 8, 2018 at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, Portland**

This summit was by far our largest, with over 200 participants and a waiting list of other interested members. A highlight of the day was the choral performance during the opening plenary by the Portland Gay Men's Chorus, performing a work presenting the last words of several Black men killed by police or other law enforcement agents. We provided five tracks for deeper exploration through the day in our break-out groups, each focused on a different topic within the criminal justice system:

- School-to-Prison Pipeline
- Victim and Survivor Voices
- Prison Reentry Supports
- Policy Advocacy for Reform
- Ministries within Prison

The closing plenary featured a panel of “witnesses” who spoke from their experience and what they’d heard at each of the five workshop tracks.

**Year Two: March 20-21, 2019 at First United Methodist Church, Eugene**

*In partnership with United Methodist Women*

This summit drew roughly 80 attendees. On the opening night, we screened the film *Thirteenth*, followed by a discussion facilitated by The Rev. J.W. Matt Hennessee, pastor of Vancouver Avenue First Baptist Church of Portland the EMO board chair. During the full day of the gathering, we provided a resource fair in between workshops. This was the first summit where we engaged our two-track model, focusing our participants’ energies on reentry and advocacy through over three hours of break-out sessions on each topics. This allowed for a deeper dive into the topics than typical conferences provide and allowed participants to start generating plans for taking their learning home for continued action.

**Year Three: March 6-7, 2020 at First Presbyterian Church, Newberg**

*In partnership with Remnant Initiatives*

This summit drew 60 attendees for the opening night film and 70 for the full day gathering. In addition to outreach to people of faith, there was special outreach to students and teachers at various local colleges, with some classes offering extra credit for attendance. On our opening night, we screened the film *The House I Live In*, which emphasized the way the “war on drugs” feeds mass incarceration.

## **B. Community Engagement and Ongoing Advocacy**

### **CRIMINAL JUSTICE SABBATH/SECOND CHANCES SABBATH**

From 2016 to 2020, EMO and EDO jointly hosted an annual Criminal Justice Sabbath—a day in the life of a faith community dedicated to compassion for everyone impacted by the criminal justice system: offenders, victims of crime, legal and corrections staff, law enforcement and the families of all these people. We invited congregations to make space for people impacted by the criminal justice system—in their hearts and in their schedules—by dedicating a day of community together to think about, pray about, learn about and act for the people with lived experience of our justice system.

Each year, we created a resource guide to provide ideas for worship, teaching and action. These guides remain available online at the EMO website ([emoregon.org/cosa/criminal-justice-sabbath](http://emoregon.org/cosa/criminal-justice-sabbath)). We promoted the special Sabbath at our Hearing the Cries for Justice summits and through our online networks.

We heard from several congregations in the Episcopal, Presbyterian, United Methodist and non-denominational traditions that participated in the Sabbath using our resources. While we picked a set weekend each year to host these Sabbaths, we found that congregations tended to choose their own dates.

We were contacted by a reentry support group in Illinois that liked our resources enough to want to share them with their own networks, and in April 2020 we had planned to do a coordinated Second Chances Sabbath. Our shift toward the frame of Second Chances Sabbath was undertaken to emphasize the spiritual themes of the day and to focus on the ways congregations can support reentry. April is designated nationally as Second Chances Month, which also seemed a fitting way to engage the topic more broadly. Without the pandemic, this would have received greater emphasis this year.

## **PUBLIC POLICY ADVOCACY**

Through the Criminal Justice program, EMO participated in a variety of justice-related events and advocacy efforts:

- Restorative Justice Coalition of Oregon
- Partnership for Safety and Justice
- Oregon Justice Resource Center
- Local Public Safety Coordinating Councils
- Community Peace Collaborative

## **LIFT EVERY VOICE OREGON**

Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon participated in the leadership of the interfaith gun safety movement hosted by Lift Every Voice Oregon, connecting the group's advocacy efforts with EMO's membership. In particular, we were instrumental in coordinating the End Gun Violence Sabbath, engaging around 40 congregations in prayer and action for gun safety on a single weekend in November 2019.

## **COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND EDUCATION**

Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon was invited to educate the community about criminal justice issues at a variety of venues, from the Spring Presbytery in 2018 to a senior capstone class at Portland State University. We also contributed a panel to the Collins Summit in 2018 about the intersections of immigration and criminal justice.

## **CAPACITY BUILDING**

During this time, we applied for two federal grants that would have supported a much larger program for coordinating post-prison reentry supports across Oregon faith communities. We unfortunately were declined for both grant attempts, despite a broad and impressive range of support letters from community partners aligned with our goals.

---

### 3. FUTURE: Where we go from here

Through the course of this partnership, we have learned much from our participants about where we would wish to steer this work. We have heard from you and know the work continues. We are grateful for the many partners who will advance implementation of the ideas and issues we raised.

If we had unlimited resources, there are many needs and many promising projects that could use our support. As Deacon Tom says, "The ocean is large, and the boats are few." We have sought to strap together a few of these boats, so that we have more of a chance to weather the storms.

The need is great. Few weeks would pass without EMO receiving a request for help from someone in prison reaching out to anyone who might spare an ounce of compassion.

The impulse to help is great, too. We are frequently contacted by people with new ideas for how to help. Less important than the specific ideas or projects is the surge of compassion that drives someone to want to volunteer their time to help.

The moral mandate to act for justice is clear. The pragmatic impetus may be less obvious, but we see this as an issue that can benefit an organization from engaging. Criminal justice issues remain one of the few topics that can bring people together across partisan lines. The impact of mass incarceration impacts us across the state of Oregon, from Portland's communities of color that bear the disproportionate burden of being incarcerated, to the rural communities of Madras and Pendleton that seek an economic lifeline through hosting prisons in their towns.

There are a few big project ideas we have been presented with over the years, any of which could be fruitfully taken on, given sufficient resources and support.

**Criminal Justice Reform** through public advocacy for law changes, policy development and funding that reduce the need for incarceration by providing supportive services for those with addiction, mental health and violence issues. Organizations like EMO and Partnership for Safety and Justice provide opportunities for training for "lobbying" at the state and local levels.

**Reentry support.** This is a key takeaway from our work: a primary calling of Oregon congregations should be to support safe reentry for our neighbors returning from prison and jail. This is a more challenging ministry than visiting prisons, in many ways, because it entails a shift in how the congregation views its mission to the community, and it brings "those" people into "our" spaces, breaking down the psychological walls between the incarcerated and those "outside" (walls which remain long after the physical walls of prison are behind us). There are innumerable ways congregations can and do engage in reentry support, from formal

mentorship to small group support to adults-only worship services, but these efforts are largely isolated and uncoordinated. There is great potential in an entity like EMO coordinating these efforts at both the state and community levels.

**Providing a voice** for adults in custody—especially women—to share their experiences of life in Oregon prisons. This would truly embody the concept of “hearing the cries.” The stories are there, though the platforms for women and men to share them are more difficult to establish.

**Support to “lifers”** in the Oregon Department of Corrections prisons. There are volunteer efforts to provide this support in a less organized way.

**Letter-writing.** Various pen-pal exchange projects have been suggested. For success, these would require a hosting organization, a coordinator and ongoing support to letter-writers to ensure accountability on both ends, help trouble-shoot and learn best practices.

**Family support,** especially through visitation. Given the disproportionate number of Oregonians incarcerated in the eastern part of the state, the distance between family members is a structural challenge, and one of the ways inhumanity is built into the correctional system. There is potential in setting up new systems to bring family members from different parts of the state to visit loved ones in distant prisons. Some systems like this exist, but they could be expanded by engaging congregational volunteers on both ends: as drivers from the starting point to hosts in the towns where the prisons are located. Current research suggests a high correlation between in-person visitation and the mental health and well-being of adults in custody, with wider ramifications for the general safety of the prison atmosphere as a whole and successful reentry. Children of the incarcerated are often an overlooked population. Programs that provide in-school counseling and summer camperships are needed. These are also the compassionate things to do. An organization like EMO could provide the coordination for such a visitation effort.

With many of these individual projects, the goal would remain consistent with our work over the years of this partnership—not only providing for a need, but engaging community volunteers to meet that need, and thereby receive the benefit of being educated about an issue they might otherwise be able to ignore. The community is as much the “client” in these projects as the people in prison or their families. Because of this, the goal is not just a quantitative one but a qualitative one—even if our programs do not serve as many clients in the system, by engaging the community to meet the need, we are changing society itself to be more tolerant and thoughtful about our neighbors in the justice system.

**Finally, a Faith Roundtable for Criminal Justice Reform.** There is interest amongst faith leaders and denominations for a quarterly or every-other-month meeting of faith leaders active in criminal justice work. EMO began hosting this roundtable, and it could be reconstituted with those initial members, plus many others. This would be a natural structure for accountability for



ecumenical projects and for advising projects on how to best engage the faith communities. It would also provide capacity to build a bank of public storytellers who are representative of faith communities for public policy advocacy. Perhaps most useful, this group could advise on ways for organizations to reach congregational members where they are at, taking the criminal justice reform message not only to lawmakers or the public but to their faith communities. This work needn't be just one-way from the faith communities to lawmakers, but could go out to congregations too. The Faith Roundtable members would be natural catalysts to take back to their communities and spark conversations, including continuing Criminal Justice Sabbath and contributing to the resource guide.

It is hoped that this report is not an ending but a helpful tool in continuing the inspiration, motivation and activism of the many participants that made this project so fruitful. There are too many to thank individually here, but please know of our gratitude for not only for showing up, but also for your active help in enriching our approach as we proceeded.

## **GRATITUDE**

From Jan Musgrove Elfers, president of EMO:

Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon truly appreciates the relationship with the Episcopal Diocese of Oregon that was solidified by this grant partnership. We are tremendously grateful for the opportunity to work so closely together on this project particularly and Criminal Justice Reform (CJR) in general. Deacon Tom's extensive, decades-long experience in this field and his passion for CJR has been an invaluable resource to draw upon. I also want to give my deepest gratitude and praise to Rev. Audrey for the dedication and professionalism you have given to this work. The Hearing the Cries summits as well as the other CJR work that has been accomplished in the last three years is important and will continue to grow. I appreciate the fact that Hearing the Cries was given wide parameters to allow for flexibility. CJR has so many important and varied facets. This topic has a "bridge building" capacity in a time of great division and polarization.

Our belief that restorative justice is deeply embedded in the gospel creates a foundation as Christians to engage in this work. Other faith traditions also adhere to this model, so people of faith and goodwill can collaborate with deep conviction as we seek to, in Bryan Stevenson's words, "get proximate to people who are suffering so we can change the narrative about our neighbors." Hearing the Cries accomplished this by creating space in the summits for people to vulnerably share their lives in a safe place.

So much of our public discourse about many issues, including this one, is dichotomous. Yet we know that we are all complex and our lives are deeply connected one to another. These summits created the opportunity for the participants to go deeply into those complexities to challenge the conclusions that we make about one another. Through a lens of compassion and

justice, we can see the harm that has been committed—particularly by systems that perpetuate injustice and racism. For some, this is an uncomfortable but necessary process to reflect on our own biases, implicit or explicit. As we uncover bias, we then are able to question our assumptions about what is the most effective way to heal communities and restore people. Then we can draw on the assets of our communities to empower one another, bring hope and make lasting change that will positively impact our families now and in future generations.

From my experience attending each summit, the framework achieved the stated goals to inspire, educate, motivate, equip and strengthen networks of communities. Speakers were inspirational and educational. It was important to change the venue to different cities to enable various communities to engage in this process, and it was interesting to listen and learn from those who live in these communities. Inspiration can lead to motivation. And there is so much work to do. I am grateful for the Criminal Justice Sabbath/Second Chances Sabbath resource. This is an excellent way to equip congregations to continue to lift up the topic and to emphasize the many ways that people are impacted by the criminal justice system.

Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon includes CJR as a priority in our public policy advocacy, as we work alongside allies like the Partnership for Safety and Justice on such matters as the IP 44 ballot measure initiative. We enthusiastically support removing criminal penalties for small amounts of personal possession of drugs and instead direct people to drug treatment and recovery services. We also hope to continue to lift up the voices of incarcerated people. The Rev. Mark Knutson and The Rev. J.W. Matt Hennessee, EMO's current co-chair, are some of the clergy deeply committed to CJR.

Recently, EMO issued a statement decrying the killing of yet another African American man, George Floyd, by the hands of a police officer in Minneapolis, while other officers stood by. The video is sickening and enraging. Clearly we have not addressed the racism that poisons our communities and the criminal justice system. As stated, "The moral mandate to act for justice is clear." We are seeing violence in our streets across the country this week because of a clear lack of justice. Although we don't condone violence, it is absolutely understandable after so many primarily black lives have been lost due to systemic racism.

In the midst of this tragedy, we learned in May that this summer the Oregon Department of Corrections will empty death row at the Oregon State Prison and send the 27 men who live there to general population or other prison housing. This move follows a move that the Legislature made last year, changing the aggravated murder statute and severely limiting the kinds of killings eligible for capital punishment. So while Oregon unfortunately still has a death penalty in our laws, it is unlikely that Oregon's death row will grow in the future. We are seeing other legislative victories that I believe are a direct result of the advocacy that EMO has engaged in with partners.