

**American Baptist Churches of Metropolitan New York  
Board of Directors  
Report of the Public Mission Committee  
June 9, 2015  
POLICE REFORM**

As people of faith, citizens of the United States, and residents of New York City and surrounding areas, the American Baptist Churches of Metropolitan New York calls on our members to participate with other religious communions and civic organizations who are calling for changes in policies that promote peace and justice for all in order to insure the safety and security of all of its citizenry. Highly publicized recent incidents involving police actions against unarmed persons have heightened our collective consciousness. Of great concern at this time is the deteriorated relationship between communities of color and the police who are expected to serve and protect all. As massive protests across our nation and in the New York City area bear witness, lives have been being needlessly lost. American Baptists, with an historic commitment to peace, (see 1985 policy statement)<sup>1</sup> and racial justice (see 1989 policy statement),<sup>2</sup> again at this time are invited to respond. Relying on the witness of the American Baptist Churches USA,<sup>3</sup> the National Council of Churches,<sup>4</sup> as well as other relevant data and research, we identify the following:

**The Situation**

While there is no agency that tracks police shootings of unarmed people, the research that does exist paints a sobering and persistent picture. In 2007, *Color Lines* and the *Chicago Reporter* conducted a joint national investigation of fatal police shootings in the ten largest cities in the United States and found a disproportionately high number of black persons. In San Diego, Las Vegas and in the City of New York this is particularly true where the percentage of black people killed by police officers was more than double their percentage of the city's total population. An alarming pattern in police shootings of Latinos was also found.<sup>5</sup> NAACP president Cornell Williams Brooks, in an interview in *Mother Jones* said "We need not look for individual racists to say that we have a culture of policing that is really rubbing salt into longstanding racial wounds. It's a culture in which people suspected of minor crimes are met with an overwhelmingly major, often lethal, use of force,"<sup>6</sup> While recent changes in the New York City's "Stop, Question and Frisk" policies, as well as low level marijuana enforcement activities may help reduce the level of police violence among people of color, much needs to be done to clearly restore trust between communities of color and the police who are charged with protecting them.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.abc-usa.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/peace.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.abc-usa.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/RACIAL-JUSTICE.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.abc-usa.org/2015/05/12/american-baptists-call-for-peace-following-recent-police-killings/>

<sup>4</sup> [http://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/news/2015-5\\_CUG\\_Policing.php](http://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/news/2015-5_CUG_Policing.php)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.colorlines.com/archives/2007/11/killed\\_by\\_the\\_cops.html](http://www.colorlines.com/archives/2007/11/killed_by_the_cops.html)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/08/police-shootings-michael-brown-ferguson-black-men>

## The Issues and Dynamics at Work

### 1. **Dignity of Human Life**

In Ferguson, Staten Island, Baltimore and other places where human life has been lost, those slain were demonized. The police officer who killed Michael Brown reported: "He looked like a demon- when I shot him he bulked toward me-I feared for my life." Mr. Eric Garner declared, "I can't breathe" eleven times, yet the arresting officers showed no mercy, and afterwards justified their violence.

### 2. **Race**

The dynamics of race and the manifestation of racism are complex subjects even in the era of President Obama and Mayor DeBlasio. The historic roots of institutionalized racism that reach back to the founding of our country are embedded in our municipal systems and evident in every community throughout this nation including ours. As people of faith who live and work in the world, we have the responsibility to recognize racism's dynamic, and demand its eradication. We recognize that whenever we devise, maintain or perpetuate systems and structures that oppress people based on race, culture, ethnicity and class, we interfere with God's purposes and interrupt the life, gifts and opportunities for all of God's children.

### 3. **Mass Incarceration**

Related to police violence is mass incarceration: The incarceration rate in the United States has quintupled since the 1980s. As Michelle Alexander has compellingly argued, the mass incarceration of primarily black and Latino men is the "new Jim Crow" - a racial caste system within our nation that is imposed at great cost to many. The impetus to fill our prisons and jails leads local police departments to becoming increasingly aggressive and too often utilizing inappropriate enforcement tactics, particularly with people of color.<sup>7</sup>

### 4. **Increased militarization of police**

After over a decade of war in the Mideast, the United States military has accumulated an arsenal of combat weapons. As the Department of Defense downsizes, it is re-issuing billions of dollars worth of equipment to local police departments. While some of this equipment may be useful for specialized purposes, i.e. SWAT teams, their widespread use in policing is problematic and sends an injurious message to civilian populations. As Dr. Tim Nolan, Chair of the Department of Criminal Justice of SUNY at Plattsburg stated, "in many communities, particularly those of color, the message is being received loud and clear: 'You are the enemy!'"<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Alexander, Michelle *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness* (The New Press, 2010)

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2014/06/stop-arming-police-military/87163/?oref=defenseone\\_today\\_nl](http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2014/06/stop-arming-police-military/87163/?oref=defenseone_today_nl)

Criminal Justice Journalist, Radley Balko, identifies the “rise of the warrior cop.”<sup>9</sup> President Barack Obama has signed legislation to prohibit federal agencies from providing local police officers with military equipment such as grenade launchers, high-caliber weapons and bayonets. Yet, additional limits and restrictions are needed.

5. **Problematic Grand Jury System**

When the police appear to overstep their authority and engage in acts of illegal brutality it is of sobering concern. Concerns about the reliability of the Grand Jury process need to be raised: prosecuting attorneys who oversee Grand Juries rely on police cooperation to prosecute criminal cases. Additionally, prosecutors who are often elected officials rely on the political support of the police unions for their successful elections. The importance of impartiality is therefore compromised when it comes to police defendants. An alternative to consider is the appointment of special prosecutors to cases involving the use of excessive force.

**Biblical and Theological Rationale**

As the prophet Isaiah proclaimed and as Jesus cited when he established his own ministry, “The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.” (Isa 61:1; Luke 4:18 NRSV) In our current social context, the mandates of the old and new covenant calls for justice for all persons including those experiencing conscious or unconscious racially motivated police brutality, and/or unjust incarceration. As Jesus’ life and ministry itself was interrupted by an unjust, state sanctioned execution, we condemn similar systemic injustice in our time upon others.

**In Response We Recommend the Following:**

1. Pray.

Pray to possess the courage to confront and transform a culture that tolerates cruel and dehumanizing behavior. Pray that we eradicate the poverty, racism and conditions that feed into riots and retaliatory violence. Pray for the healing for all persons experiencing ongoing physical, psychological and emotional trauma from these injustices.

2. Facilitate Conversations on the Dynamics of Race and Racism.

Deepen your own community’s understanding of the way in which the issues of race collide with justice. Engage with others in anti-racist conversations with training to help root out attitudes and behaviors that promote racial oppression or racial privilege and to help foster the development of anti-racist systems and institutions.

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<sup>9</sup> Balko, Radley *Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America’s Police Forces* (Public Affairs, 2013)

3. Support Community-Based Policing.

Examine the kind of trainings police departments are using to prepare officers for their work. Insist on cultural awareness and sensitivity training modules to help them develop just and balanced relationships to build greater trust and respect within the neighborhoods they serve. Encourage residents to engage in dialogue to communicate ways of improving community policing practices to encourage communities in coming together with respect for the dignity of all and residents, and increase neighborhood peace.

4. Engage in Peaceful Protests and Vigils.

Vigils and protests communicate the message that efforts in seeking the truth will continue unabated. As demonstrators are urged to protest with non-violent tactics, we call on responding law enforcement to protect the First Amendment rights of protesters and refrain from aggression against civilians that suppresses their voices.

5. Education.

Learn more about the history of policing in the United States, particularly in respect to the dynamics of race in policing practices. Read about the problematic realities of mass incarceration, militarization and the criminal industrial complex. Facilitate church-based education about the manifestation of these issues.

6. Address the Fears of Youth.

In relation to subtle and overt expressions of racism, cultural biases and the impact of police brutality on youth, particularly youth of color, fear is a pervasive factor. Facilitating open, honest dialogue with youth will help them better position themselves to handle and navigate the challenging dynamics involving the police. We call on our churches to engage young people in conversation about how to act, interact and respond (both verbally and in body language) by giving them tangible alternative verbal and physical responses... Solicit Community Affairs Officers to help facilitate effective education and training processes. Invite police officers to your church or community; create role plays and frank discussions to help youth experience, understand and gain confidence to safely handle a situation when stopped or negatively engaged by the police. Solicit the help of counselors or psychologists to explore the impact of fear in the daily life of youth. Conduct question and answer sessions with parents, youth and other concerned adults. Create panel discussions that involve youth, police officers, church leaders, and other community persons. Create local "Safe Havens" and "Zones" where youth may visit or call for help, direction, and guidance.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> [www.usnews.com/news/blogs/washington-whispers/2014/12/05/when-it-comes-to-police-brutality-fear-is-also-a-factor](http://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/washington-whispers/2014/12/05/when-it-comes-to-police-brutality-fear-is-also-a-factor)

<http://gawker.com/what-black-parents-tell-their-sons-about-the-police-1624412625>

7. Vote in local and national elections.  
Remember that elected officials play a huge role in determining the nature of policing in our communities. Keep elected officials accountable.
8. Advocate for appropriate changes in laws and legal procedures.  
Consider the possibility of special prosecutors for police-involved grand jury cases in your communities. Advocate for the increased use of body cameras to document police-civilian interactions.
9. Divest/Invest.  
Where appropriate, examine church endowments and holdings that invest in the prison industrial complex and contribute to mass incarceration. Consider investing or reinvesting in vehicles that support communities, particularly in communities-at-risk.
10. Advocate for Reforms in Police Training.  
Make your voices heard in forums that address police training. Advocate for programs such as conflict transformation, cultural sensitivity training and the appropriate uses of force and more.
11. Foster Positive Relationships between Local Communities and Police.  
Explore ways of fostering positive relationships between clergy, community leaders, and local police. Consider using the resource “Clergy, Community, Cops Project,” developed for churches in the NYC metropolitan area by the Rev. Karyn Carlo PhD, NYPD Captain (retired).<sup>11</sup>
12. Visit [www.gatheringforjustice.org](http://www.gatheringforjustice.org) and sign the petition indicating your support of the list of demands that have been crafted by *Gathering for Justice*.
13. Consider congregational participation in prisoner re-entry programs.  
Related to the need for police reform is a need for just and compassionate treatment of formerly incarcerated “returning citizens” trying to reintegrate into society. Help returning citizens find employment and advocate for changes in laws that are barriers to reintegration, i.e., the requirement to disclose their formerly incarcerated status on job applications, prohibitions to registering to vote, etc. Additionally, encourage members of your church to examine and overcome their own prejudgments against returning or formerly incarcerated citizens. An excellent resource that is available within our denomination is the Prisoner Re-Entry and Aftercare Ministry of the American Baptist Home Mission Society.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> She can be contacted at [Karyn.Carlo@gmail.com](mailto:Karyn.Carlo@gmail.com) for further information.

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.abhms.org/justice\\_ministries/prisoner\\_re-entry/](http://www.abhms.org/justice_ministries/prisoner_re-entry/)

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