



## CHRISTIANS FOR THE ABOLITION OF PRISONS

P.O. BOX 4355, WEST HILLS, CA 91308  
[christiansforabolition.org](http://christiansforabolition.org)

*Hannah Bowman, director*  
*[contact@christiansforabolition.org](mailto:contact@christiansforabolition.org)*

Grace and peace from the God who sets the prisoners free (Luke 4:18)!

I am writing to you today on behalf of Christians for the Abolition of Prisons.

**Who are we?** Christians for the Abolition of Prisons is an organization dedicated to prison abolitionist advocacy, education, and public theology in the progressive church. Through our website, [christiansforabolition.org](http://christiansforabolition.org), we offer educational materials about prison abolition and theology. We are building a network of churches, congregations, dioceses, synods, and other religious communities committed to the goal of prison abolition.

**What are we asking you to do?** We want you, as a church leader, to ask your community to make a commitment to join our campaign for prison abolition. We are *not* asking for money. We are *not* asking for particular policy action right now. We are building a network of churches and religious communities committed to our goals, to prepare for specific local and future action towards abolition.

**Why should you join our campaign?** Articulating a commitment to prison abolition is an important first step in participating in God's liberating action toward a world without prisons. Theologian James Cone writes that the task of theology is "to clarify what the Church believes and does in relation to its participation in God's liberating work in the world." Joining us is a way of making such a statement of clarification, and a conscious commitment to the work of liberation.

By articulating your commitment to abolitionist goals and organizing alongside other churches and religious communities that share the same commitment, you will help us build a network we can call on for specific action when relevant legislation is at stake. Connecting in solidarity with one another is the first step in building power to take effective action.

The hard work of discussing and articulating your comment to prison abolition will also help change hearts and minds in your community. Making a decision to affiliate with our campaign will require a process of education and discernment in your church community.

Your congregation may already be deeply involved in the fight against prisons. We want to support you in the work you're already doing, and connect you with other congregations doing that work. We offer educational resources and support for active organizing campaigns.

We believe that by joining our campaign and making a conscious, communal decision to commit your congregation or group to anti-prison activism, you will be able to strengthen the work you are already doing.

Theologian William Cavanaugh writes of the church as a visible body in witness against the violence of the world. Making visible your commitment to prison abolition, on theological grounds, will help strengthen your community overall in its discipleship and its proclamation of the gospel.

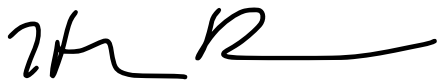
### **What does joining our campaign look like for you in practice?**

- We will feature the names of affiliated congregations, groups, and organizations on our website, and encourage you to share our information and resources on your website as well.
- We will coordinate a quarterly newsletter sharing the anti-prison work being done by affiliated congregations and groups, as well as updates as needed on active organizing campaigns for which individual congregations and groups need support.
- We can provide postcards, flyers, and other physical materials for you to publicize and explain your involvement in abolition work to members and visitors to your congregation.
- We encourage you to support our work with continued education about issues of prison abolition and mass incarceration, using our [resources](#) including [Bible study materials](#) and [bibliography/recommended reading lists](#).

I am excited for the movement we are building—a movement participating in the work God is already doing to set captives free. Our Christian faith is a firm foundation for us to support all the work being done in the struggle against incarceration and for true restorative and transformative justice.

I hope you'll join us. Included below are some suggestions for your congregational discernment. If and when you decide you'd like to make a commitment to our campaign, please reach out to me at [contact@christiansforabolition.org](mailto:contact@christiansforabolition.org).

Peace and solidarity,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Hannah Bowman', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Hannah Bowman  
Director, Christians for the Abolition of Prisons

## **Joining Christians for the Abolition of Prisons:** **Guidelines for Congregational Discernment**

Prison abolition may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable to many members of your congregation. The decision to join Christians for the Abolition of Prisons needs to be approached through a careful process—and you know your context best. Here are some general suggestions, however, if you choose to begin this process:

### **1. Start with education**

Members of your congregation may never have heard of prison abolition or seriously considered it. Often even those working for the end of mass incarceration are not familiar with the logic of abolitionist organizing. Prisons are designed to be opaque, so learning more about what goes on in them is the first step towards activism. We have [resources](#) available, about conditions in prisons, the history of mass incarceration, the theology of prison abolition, and more, to help with education in your congregation or group.

### **2. Make space for listening to personal stories**

What experience have members of your congregation had with imprisonment? With interpersonal violence? With issues of addiction or property crime? Holding space for people's stories as well as their questions and fears/uncertainty is an essential part of building support for abolition. Consider holding listening sessions or one-on-one meetings to engage with personal stories and questions, as part of your educational and discernment process. Building safe communities without prisons can be a frightening endeavor, and respecting the legitimate fear of what a world without prisons might mean is necessary to change hearts and minds. Storytelling and community-building are, themselves, abolitionist work.

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### 3. Consider your congregational resources

One model for considering if commitment to this campaign is right for you at this time is to look through the lens of grounding, accountability, fit, and opportunity.<sup>1</sup>

- **Grounding:** How does prison abolition fit into your congregation or group's understanding of the gospel and its mission and identity?
- **Accountability:** How will your congregation or group's commitment support the work of marginalized voices already working for abolition, and lift up the work of those most impacted by the system of mass incarceration?
- **Fit:** What are your resources, aspirations, and ability to support prison abolition? Does a focus on prison abolition support work your members are already doing?
- **Opportunity:** What abolitionist work is being done in your local community where you can have an influence? How can your congregation or group become a respected participant in public dialogue on local issues related to prison abolition? What other groups in your community or denomination doing similar work can you partner with?

### 4. Make a conscious commitment, but leave room for dissenting voices

We believe there is value in making ethical beliefs and commitments explicit within a congregation. Articulating our values is the first step in ethical action. But making explicit ethical commitments can be polarizing, especially in communities where there is disagreement about controversial issues like prison abolition. As you move forward with affiliation with our campaign, think about ways to affirm disagreements of conscience and support dissenting voices. Also consider continuing education to further clarify, explain, and reinforce the commitment you are making.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the Unitarian Universalist Association's workbook "Inspired Faith, Effective Action": <https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/washingtonoffice/ifea.pdf>.