



VICTORIAN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

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A safer and wiser Victoria: An open Letter to Victorian Parliamentarians and candidates for the 2014 Victorian State Election

10 September 2014

[letter addressed to each member of the Victorian Parliament]

As leaders of Christian Churches in Victoria, we are asking our politicians and electoral candidates, over the next four years, to

1. Invest in people, not prisons
2. Fund more offender diversion and treatment programs
3. Maintain funding for correctional programs that work.

As Christians we believe that each person is made in God's image and has a dignity that can never be lost (Genesis 1:27). We should have compassion for everyone affected by crime, and seek to repair the harm to victims and restore perpetrators as dignified, self respecting members of society.

We recognise the importance of the rule of law: this includes responding to crimes against the person and their possessions. We also recognise a place for prisons in contributing to a safer and just society, by containing and rehabilitating prisoners, and successfully reintegrating them into the community upon release.

Our great concern continues to be that those over-represented in our prison population continue to be people with:

- o mental illness (almost 50% of offenders in custody have some history of mental illness)
- o poor education (only 6% of those imprisoned in Victoria have completed secondary schooling)
- o Aboriginal heritage (Aboriginal imprisonment rates are 13 times higher than the rest of the Australian population)
- o alcohol and drug use problems (70% of all new offenders have recently used an illegal drug, and 55% have drug and alcohol issues associated with their offence).

Harsher penalties and longer sentences tend to entrench crime, rather than resolving it. Over the past four years we have seen in Victoria:

- o The number of people in prison increase from 4,537 in June 2010 to over 6,000 in June 2014 (32% increase), with 2,900 more prison beds planned
- o Between 2010-11 and 2014-15 the cost of running prisons has increased from \$640 million to \$942 million (47% increase)



- The abolition of suspended sentences and restrictions to parole, so that more Victorians will be sent to prison for longer periods, and more will be released into the community without supervised support.

Invest in People, not Prisons

A life of crime often begins in disadvantaged communities where people and families do not have enough to make ends meet and cannot access quality health, education, employment or other resources important for life opportunities.

We urge Members of Parliament to ensure that we invest in people and communities, rather than prisons, and work to break the cycle of crime, imprisonment and re-offending. There are many good health, education and housing initiatives which have been shown to strengthen poor communities and improve community cohesion. Unnecessarily harsh law and order policies should be changed.

Divert those who come into contact with the Law

Diversion programs such as the Youth Justice Group Conferencing Program, the Criminal Justice Diversion Program, Drug Courts, Koori Courts, the Neighbourhood Justice Centre and Community Corrections Orders all offer effective alternatives to prison. We urge Members of Parliament to further increase diversion programs to turn people away from crime, towards constructive community living.

Maintain funding for correctional programs that work

To break the cycle of reoffending, government should increase investment in rehabilitation and pre-release programs.

We urge government to properly resource the parole system so that it can re-introduce ex-offenders to the community under effective supervision.

Government and the community must help ex-offenders more upon their release, with support for accommodation, employment and social re-integration.

We urge Members of Parliament to promote effective policies to strengthen communities, reduce crime and restore the dignity of victims and offenders.

Yours sincerely

[Signed by leaders of Victorian Churches – see next page]



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Uniting Church in Australia

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President, Victorian Council of Churches

+ Philip Freier
Anglican Archbishop of Melbourne

Mike Coleman (Major)
Divisional Commander, Melbourne Central
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+ Denis J Hart
Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne

+ Les Tomlinson DD
Catholic Bishop of Sandhurst

+ Andrew Curnow
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