



Restore Voting Rights !

Why be concerned – what do the facts say?

Under current Virginia law, any person convicted for a felony loses his or her voting rights for life, regardless of whether the felony is as small as unlawfully taking anything of over \$200 in value or as serious as first degree murder.

- Among the 50 states, only four (IA, FL, KY, VA) take away the right to vote for life for a felony conviction. Two states (ME, VT) permit incarcerated persons to vote. Other states restore the right to vote either upon release from incarceration, upon completion of all court imposed punishment, or following a fixed waiting period thereafter.
- Currently approximately 400,000 Virginians are disenfranchised for life. Approximately 300,000 of these have completed all court imposed punishment and live in our communities as second class citizens who cannot vote.
- Due to the way laws have been made and administered, disenfranchisement disproportionately impacts the poor and people of color, with one out of every five adult African-American men in Virginia now disenfranchised for life.
- The only way such disenfranchised persons can get their voting rights restored is through the Governor's approval.
- The good news is that nonviolent ex-offenders, which now includes drug offenders, who have completed all court-imposed punishment may be considered for immediate restoration of their voting rights without submitting an application. But many do not know this and the state does not have contact information for them.
- The waiting period for ex-offenders who have 'paid their debt to society' for a violent crime has been reduced from five years to three years, after which they may submit an application.
- Modifying the Virginia restoration of rights process toward the practices followed in most other states can be done only through a constitutional amendment. Proposed legislative actions to that end have been defeated in the General Assembly. At the federal level, efforts to pass legislation which would restore voting rights in federal elections to the nearly 4 million disenfranchised Americans who have completed all court-imposed punishment have been unsuccessful.

What does the Bible say?

- In the parable about the unmerciful servant and the need to be merciful to others just as we have received mercy (Mt 18:23-35), in teachings about the dangers of seeking to be great and ruling over others (Mk 10:43-45), and in the parable about the Good Samaritan and the call to be neighbor to the one in need

(Lk 10:25-37), Jesus reached out to the poor and vulnerable, to those in greatest need, and calls us to follow him and carry on such work.

- While Romans 13:1-7 ("Let every person be subject to the governing authorities....") has been used to claim that persons owe an unqualified obedience to the state, this interpretation overlooks the distinction between the necessity of secular government to preserve public order, the misuse of power by secular authorities, and the reality of bad laws; neglects Paul's call not to be conformed to this world (Rom 12:1-2), ignores teachings throughout the Gospels about the transforming power of forgiveness, and disregards the prophetic call throughout the Bible to challenge unjust laws and exploitative rulers.

What does The United Methodist Church say?



- "We call upon the General Board of Church and Society to advocate for legislation which will eliminate racism and classism in the criminal justice system by . . . reinstating voting rights for ex-offenders." *The Book of Resolutions 2008*, 668.
- In its resolution on Restoration of Voting Rights (2006) the Virginia Annual Conference stated that "life-long disenfranchisement of persons who have completed all court-imposed punishment, including all court costs, fines and restitutions, is an unjustified denial of a fundamental human right", and called upon the "Governor and Members of the General Assembly to urgently prepare, pass and implement legislation that will restore the right to vote to persons who have paid their debt to society."

What do You say?

- What you say depends on what you believe and know – keep growing in your faith and becoming more informed.
- Help create awareness – tell the disenfranchised to go to <www.commonwealth.virginia.gov/JudicialSystem/Clemency/restoration.cfm> and click on "Contact Form for Non-Violent Felons" to get a form to submit their contact information and get accelerated restoration of their rights.
- Volunteer to serve on a team to help the disenfranchised in your locality get their voting rights restored.
- Advocate for the restoration of voting rights to all persons who have 'paid their debt to society' by completing all court-imposed punishment – write an article for your church's newsletter or a letter to the editor of your local newspaper.
- Contact your state legislators and request them to introduce and support legislation that will automatically restore the right to vote to all ex-offenders.

For additional resources and information visit: The Sentencing Project <www.SentencingProject.org> or contact either Glenn Rowley, Director of Justice and Missional Excellence, <GlennRowley@vaumc.org>; tel: 1.800.768.6040 / 804.521.1100, ext. 143 or Jim Templeton, Criminal Justice and Mercy Ministries Chair, Board of Church and Society <jtemple354@comcast.net> tel: 1.540.349.9623.