



THE GREATEST
GOOD

A Good Samaritan Theology on Drug Decriminalization

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**Salvation
and
Social Justice**
Liberating Public Policy Theologically



I AM

A

MAN

2

INTRODUCTION

THEORY OF CHANGE
IT'S ON 'TIL
LIBERATION

5

**THEOLOGICAL
FRAMING**

DECRIMINALIZATION,
RETRIBUTIVE
PARADIGMS, AND A
"GOOD SAMARITAN"
THEOLOGY

11

ORGANIZING

LEADING THE FIGHT
AGAINST DRUG
DECRIMINALIZATION

27

MEDIA KIT

MESSAGING THAT
MOVES

17

POLICY

A PRIESTLY AND
PROPHETIC RESPONSE
TO DRUG
DECRIMINALIZATION

45

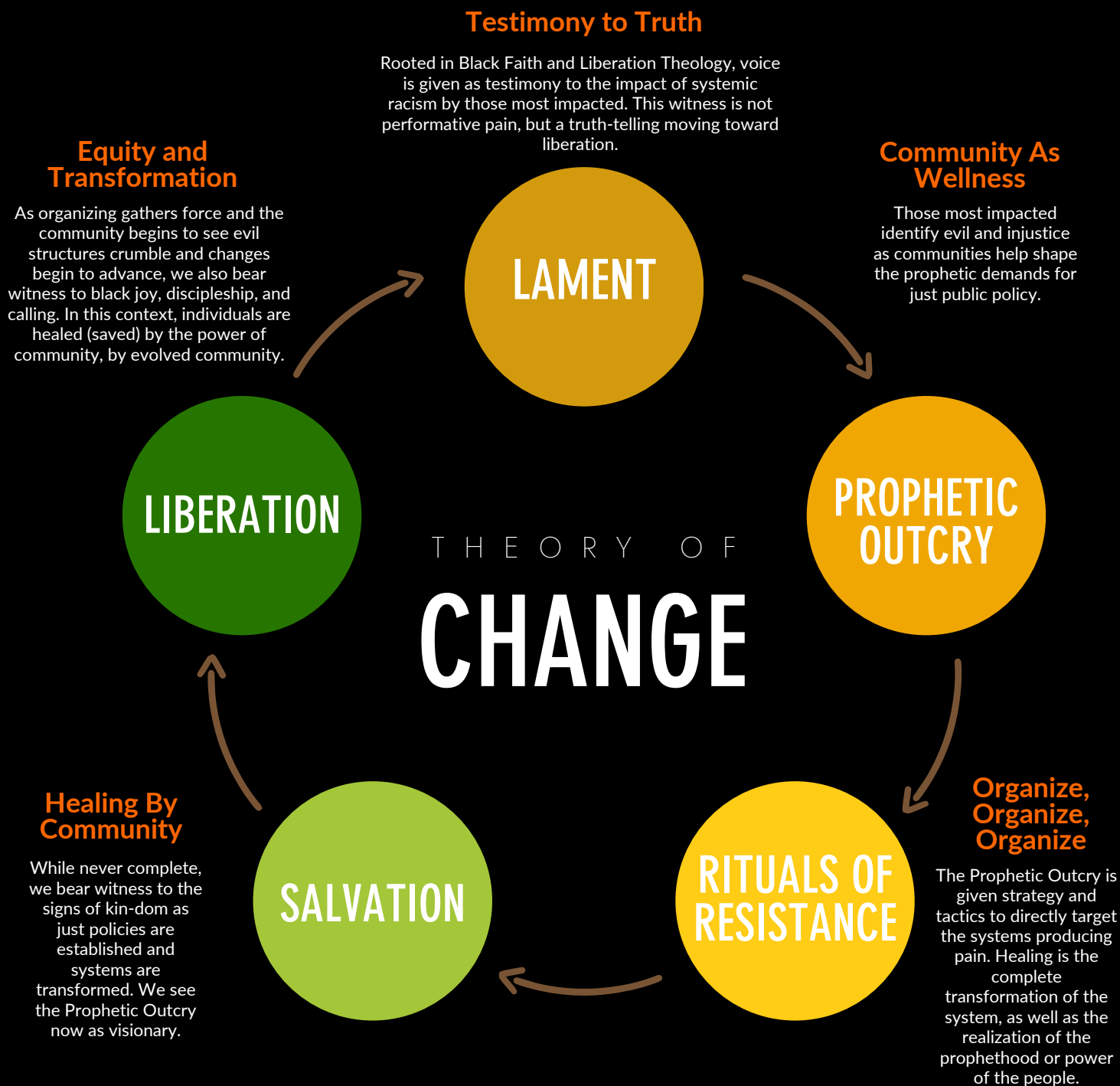
ABOUT SANDSJ

MEET THE TEAM

33

**PREACHERS &
THE PEWS**

THEOLOGICAL,
BIBLICAL, AND
LITURGICAL
RESOURCES



Brothers and Sisters

More than fifty years after the War on Drugs was launched, it is time to acknowledge that this racist policy campaign has failed to stem drug use or promote the safety of our communities. Instead, it has served as a gateway to the criminal justice system and a barrier to opportunity for people in New Jersey and around the country.

As a pastor, I often see firsthand the collateral consequences of a criminal conviction, which subjects an individual to a system of legal discrimination that can last a lifetime and can make it difficult—or even impossible—to secure employment, housing, student loans, or a driver’s license. Even without a conviction, the consequences of an arrest can include untold stigma and humiliation, the financial burden of a criminal court proceeding and lost hours at work or school. These factors have real-life consequences on families and communities, often perpetuating poverty and serving as barriers to economic mobility and success for New Jerseyans.

People’s lives are being ruined daily by the de facto racial application of failed drug laws.

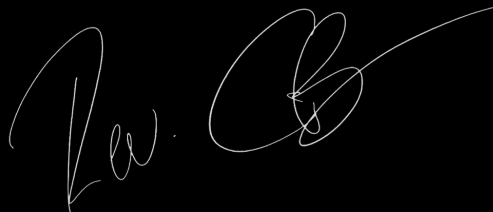
Our leaders owe it to Black New Jerseyans to seize this moment. We must end the arrests and the punitive application of the law right now. Confronting the deep-seated oppression in our criminal justice system neither begins nor ends with decriminalization. Yet it’s a key step in defusing a criminal justice system that, by the admission of one of its chief architects, was created as a bludgeon to criminalize us.

I am grateful to Revs. Dr. Timothy Levi Adkins Jones, Wille Dwayne Francois, Leslie Harrison, and Stephen Green who worked to move this issue in New Jersey. I am especially grateful for Rev. Dr. JoDavid Sales who frames this issue for us theologically using a restorative framework we can all relate to.

I trust this toolkit, like others before it, will help pastors and Black churches reframe how we think of people who use drugs.

We cannot continue to criminalize Black bodies. We must stop this racist system now.

It’s on ‘Til Liberation,



Rev. Dr. Charles F. Boyer
Greater Mt. Zion AME Church, Senior Pastor
Salvation and Social Justice, Executive Director

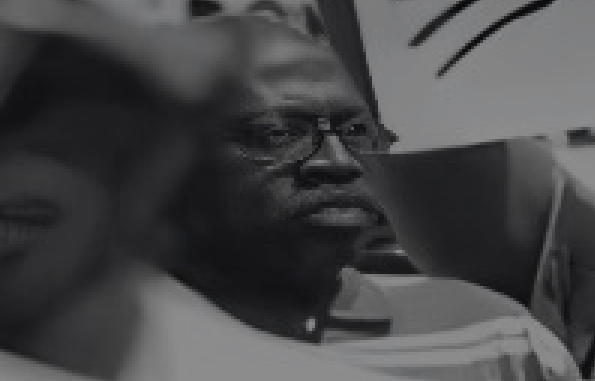


**JUST SAY
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TO THE
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JUST
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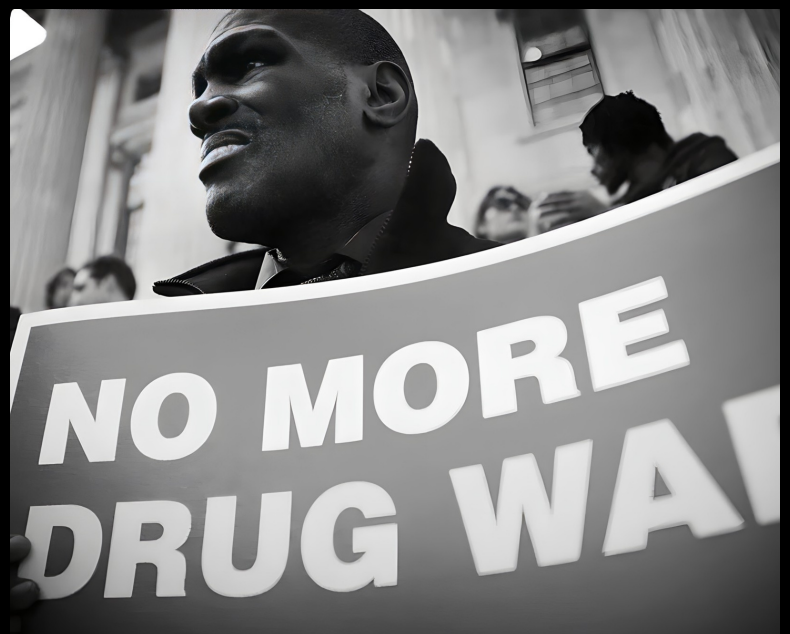
THEOLOGY

DECRIMINALIZATION, RETRIBUTIVE PARADIGMS, AND A "GOOD SAMARITAN" THEOLOGY

“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” John 9:2-3

*[The] mentality of the sin-penalty theology has not disappeared from the Christian church. Our traditional interpretations on Jesus’ crucifixion show this fact. “People sinned and [Jesus] died for their sins.” This formula is the exact mode of the retribution thinking: since people sinned against God, someone should pay for it. Jesus’ death is the penalty of people’s sin (the substitution theory)... If God cannot forgive sinners without the violent execution of Jesus, that God is neither gracious nor merciful, but retributive. In reality, our God surpasses the sin- penalty model as we have just seen. Toward the suffering humanity, God is greatly merciful. –Andrew Sung Park “The Bible and Han” in *The Other Side of Sin: Woundedness from the Perspective of the Sinned-Against**

When Christians talk about issues of harm, justice, evil, salvation, and liberation, we must admit that there is a dominant explanation of how those concepts connect. This explanation is retributive and can be summarized in three steps: 1) Sin causes all suffering and death, and suffering and death are the just punishments for sin; 2) therefore, the only way to completely defeat suffering and death is to be saved and liberated from sin; and 3) if we are to be liberated from sin, suffering, and death, then, of necessity, someone must be punished/pay back a debt, for (retributive) justice demands no less. In its combined form, we have inherited a dominant retributive and salvific formulation: Jesus Christ suffers our punishment for sin—death—on the cross, which all sinners deserve, and through his suffering and death, we are set free from sin. Noticeably absent from the outset is that this salvific formula that neither acknowledges nor liberates the sinned-against.



That preliminary was necessary, because from a certain Christian standpoint, many Christians unconsciously retain Jesus' disciples understanding of blindness when we encounter the suffering and death that surrounds the sale, use, and possession of drugs. When we encounter suffering and death, we are tempted to ask, "who sinned?" and intuitively believe that the answer to this question explains the situation, and that its remedy is found in punishment, repentance, and/or the elimination of the sin/sinner. However, Jesus replies to the disciples, "neither this man nor his parents sinned" and gives another reason why the blindness occurred. Jesus, in essence, disrupts the retributive paradigm and shows the disciples who use the paradigm are, ironically, "blind." However, no biblical witness assails the retributive paradigm of sin, suffering, and punishment more than the poetic sections of Job. Job reminds us that some harm, family fragmentation, and oppression are not the result of an individual or group's sin, no matter what Job's "God-fearing" friends said. Some suffering, trauma, and evil are complex and occur due to what Andrew Sung Park calls "uncertain causalities." When harm, oppression, and death are of considerable magnitude, the theologian and those of goodwill must be honest with reality and move beyond the prism and prison of retribution and declare: some kinds of harm and misfortune have complex causes of which personal, moral failing is only a slice, and punishment alone will not heal. Decriminalization of drugs takes such a view.

Decriminalization is not legalization. Decriminalization seeks to lessen or eliminate the penalties for (low-level) sale, use, or possession of illegal drugs. The concept of decriminalization thoroughly disrupts the sin, suffering, punishment model that undergirds our normalized theology of retribution and talk of salvation. As a pastor and theologian, I will not ignore or discredit the experience of those who have firsthand experience of the violent crime, loss, death, and trauma that is often associated with drugs. Pretending that communities and persons have not suffered or that drugs are not dangerous is not helpful, and paternalistically dehumanizes the very folks we are called to serve. However, this experience does not mean that we should accept the theological and social paradigms that undergird our understandings of and responses to drug use, possession, and sale as criminal offenses. A quick reflection on the 13th Amendment should help us see why.

"Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." 13th Amendment, U.S. Constitution

The 13th Amendment contains within it a scandalous contradiction. Regardless of claims of American Exceptionalism, the United States, like so many nations before and after it, did not abolish slavery as an institution. The goal of enslavement has consistently been the concentration of wealth and power for the few by way of perpetual plunder,

coerced labor, familial fragmentation, and exploitation amongst the enslaved—the socially "sinned-against." Enslavement, thus understood, is as fundamental to American life as the struggle for freedom. What the 13th Amendment shows clearly is that chattel slavery based upon racial designation was abolished and replaced by slavery via criminal conviction. The criminal justice system and criminality were now the legal pathway to enslavement, which means the criminalization of a people and/or a behavior necessarily leads to slavery's effects: plunder, oppression, coerced labor, familial fragmentation, and lack of resources. The 13th Amendment's ambivalence towards slavery allows the unjust practice of slavery and its harmful effects to endure unto this day, particularly amongst the very people the 13th Amendment was designed to free. Like the Black Codes during post-Reconstruction, the War on Drugs has been a pathway for the descendants of slaves to still suffer the effects of slavery. Before we begin to talk about the specific task of decriminalizing drugs, we must see that for American enslavement to be broken at the constitutional and cultural level, the decriminalization of Black people is a necessary part of any liberating strategy. This is one chief reason why we seek the decrease of penalties that exist around sale, use, and possession of drugs—because these retributive penalties and convictions disproportionately affect Black folk, the descendants of slaves in America. Of course, they do. Therefore, we seek restorative justice, mercy, and reparation. But the justice, mercy, and reparation we seek can only be understood when we see this issue not solely from the perspective of a sin/sinner, but from the perspective of the sinned-against.

The parable of Good Samaritan can help us resist the (sin-suffering-punishment) retributive paradigm that undergirds traditional approaches to drugs and criminality, and the parable gives us a theological basis on how to view decriminalization. First, we must come to understand that the person who was robbed and left half-dead in a ditch was not a sinner. He was sinned-against. Whenever we see flagrant amounts of suffering and neglect and we only use the theological language of sin or sinner, we are ripe for misdiagnoses and harmful or gaunt solutions. The sinned-against and their wounds must be tended to if we are to restore them, and restoration requires a different path than retribution alone can provide. Furthermore, there is a strong possibility that someone can be both a "robber" (sinner) and the person who was robbed (sinned-against). Let us also note that Jesus gives us a setting regarding this robbery: the Jericho Road.

We cannot understand this scenario without acknowledging context and place. Someone can be a victim of a death-dealing and exploitative social order and make a morally compromised choice while seeking relief from an oppressive environment. Let us note one final detail: the robbers are plural. What has the potential to rob is not just the personal use, selling, and possession of drugs, but poverty, lack of resources, political and social malice, apathy, racism, genetic predispositions, etc. This does not excuse the harmful behavior, crime, or violence committed by groups or individuals; rather, it places all components of any tragedy in a more holistic context—if our goal is restoration.

In other words, the Good Samaritan story deepens our understandings of violence, suffering, and restoration. The parable makes us move beyond well-worn tropes regarding drugs, crime, sin, addiction, and punishment, no matter how much those tropes appear as common sense. For too long, many religious folk have neglected the sinned-against, their wounds, the conditions that cause woundedness, and the various harms that erupt when those initial wounds are not tended to. Criminalization provides a ready-made cover that allows one to silence the reality of woundedness and the various reasons why folks possess, use, and sell drugs. When we interpret drug use, sale, and possession solely from the perspective of criminality, we become myopic and ill-equipped to restore persons and communities left for dead in the ditches of a winding road that has plundered them for centuries.

Here is something that might be easy to miss in the parable. The robbers could have killed the man who was robbed. But they did not. They had the power to kill, but they did not. That is “compassion” in the eyes of too many of our social and religious systems: mercy is nothing more than the “restraint of violence.” That kind of mercy is a faint comparison to God’s mercy because this mercy must commit violence in order to show it was lenient. “Be thankful I only gave you one black eye. I could have given you two.” This is the mercy of the 13th Amendment: slavery is abolished, except in cases of criminal conviction. This mercy reduces justice to the deterrence and punishment of crime but does not include uplifting communities. This mercy reduces those who sell, use, or possess drugs solely to criminals/sinners, and therefore, the only mercy available to them are the lengths of one’s prison sentence. This is the “mercy” of our socioeconomic and criminal justice system. This is the “mercy” of so much of our status quo.

The mercy of the state/the status quo is preoccupied with lesser evils and does not appear concerned about the greater good or communal sustainability. And, absurdly, this emaciated “mercy” somehow carries a lot of weight in our world and in the church. As Park noted in the quote above, many Christians believe that our salvation rests on Jesus suffering the punishment for our sin. In other words, even God is bound to this retributive framework. If we are honest, most policies surrounding drugs, crime, Black and Hispanic/Latinx folk, and our communities are consistently filled with lesser evils, because at bottom, lesser evils are the primary currency of the retributive paradigms that seek to dominate our theological and social imagination. **These paradigms hold that the “lesser” evils of state-sanctioned violence (punishment) and captivity (prison industrial complex) deter drug use and crime and will save us from the “greater” evils of violence and captivity associated with drugs, poverty, and crime.** But is this true? Is state-sanctioned violence and captivity a “lesser evil” when it is the primary evil suffered by Black folk and minorities in America throughout the centuries? And deeper still, can violence and captivity set us free from violence and captivity? Do violence and captivity truly restore those who are “half- dead?”

And if even God cannot escape from the prison of retributive logic, can this God set free and restore the captives? If this is who God is—a God of retribution and lesser evils—those deemed “sinners” and the sinned-against have no hope. Thanks be to God that God is a “Good Samaritan” kind of God.

The Good Samaritan shows us sometimes outsiders have better and more holistic responses than insiders. The Samaritan was ethnically and religiously different than Jesus, who was Jewish. The Levite and the priest, for unknown reasons, do nothing and pass the half-dead man. Their “mercy” is apathetic: they neither harm nor do they help, but their apathy is not neutral, because the victim continues to suffer. Therefore, their apathy ultimately leads to the status quo’s intensification. Intensifying practices that have been destructive to our communities will neither save, liberate, nor restore us, no matter how many folks we punish. We should take this lesson to heart and be open to restorative practices that do not come from our traditions. Though decriminalization of drugs is an undoubtedly tough and dizzying conversation because of our religious sensibilities and firsthand experience, we still must be open to the “Samaritans” who refuse to yield to the status quo in the hopes of restoring not just people, but communities. The Samaritan forces us to admit that our perspectives and traditions may not actually inspire appropriate responses.

Restoration requires multiple responses. The Samaritan stops, cleans and bandages wounds, transports the victim to an inn, provides a bed for convalescence, and pays the innkeeper for future services. In that vein, decriminalization is not the sole “solution” to the nexus of poverty, crime, drugs, racism, and mass incarceration. By itself, the policy will not be able to bring about restoration and healing. Any policy is subject to exploitation and disaster if poverty, socioeconomic exclusion and neglect, political disenfranchisement, and spiritual apathy are not tackled at their roots. Yet, without decriminalization, it will be difficult to shift our perspective on drugs from public safety to public health and to overturn the historical criminalization of Black folks which continues to justify an ongoing pathway to slavery and its effects. Restoration requires multipronged, comprehensive strategies. There are no shortcuts.

Restoration requires partnership. The Samaritan relied on his donkey and an innkeeper to make sure the man was restored. We must partner with economic, social, political, legal, and religious organizations that seek the goal of whole people and whole communities. The Samaritan also funded the restoration. And here we must be unequivocal: funding that is used to punish is not the same as funding that seeks to help communities and people become whole. This is the heart of restorative justice. **Restorative justice is, by its nature, communal in scope. Retributive justice often outsources matters to the state or to individuals who wield authority. One does not have to look far and see the theological implications of both.**

Above all, the Good Samaritan exemplifies God’s love and the love we should have for one another. God’s love is merciful and compassionate, and restoration turns on the wheels of compassionate mercy.



The mercy and justice of God are concerned with the greater and greatest good, not simply lesser evils and punishment. There are no shortcuts to restoration. Punishment alone cannot save. The parable forces people of faith to concede that the moment we settle for lesser evils we forfeit the charge to love God and neighbor and show that our faith is in retribution and not a God who saves, liberates, and restores and makes things new. Jesus calls the church to be liberated from a retributive theology that so easily misdiagnoses complex situations and is too comfortable with violent punishment as a corrective.



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ORGANIZING

LEADING THE FIGHT AGAINST DRUG DECRIMINALIZATION

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IN



Salvation and Social Justice (SandSJ) has been at the forefront of the organizing strategy for ending cannabis prohibition and the drug war in New Jersey. Our public campaign, framed by our theory of change and Black liberation theology has been instrumental in shaping the cannabis debate. Therefore, SandSJ sought to continue shaping the cannabis debate in New Jersey and bringing actionable change to communities negatively impacted by its long-term effects.

Specifically, we sought to facilitate ongoing social equity efforts by convening those most harmed by the drug war, poverty, over-policing etc. to envision what true equity would look like. As cannabis regulations continue to release and the license application floodgates open, it is of the utmost importance that those corporations or enterprises seeking a piece of the pie establish clear plans for social responsibility and show proof of continual progress toward those ends.

As early as 2011, the Drug Policy Alliance (DPA) of New Jersey hosted a monumental collection of community leaders, service providers, public safety personnel, and public health professionals for [a day-long conference to “chart a new course in drug policy” for New Jersey.](#)

The event was hosted by Rev. William Howard at Bethany Baptist Church, one of the oldest and largest Black churches in Newark. An important theme of discussion during the event highlighted the ripple effects of the war on drugs throughout the larger Black community including police violence, decreased property values, blighted economic corridors, and other social harms in urban areas. Rev. Howard emphasized these harms felt most by those returning from prison, “Afterwards, they are virtually permanently barred from the legal workforce for the rest of their lives. We must take our stand... by developing new, sensible strategies that solve more problems than they create.”

In 2017, the DPA-NJ, along with influential Black and Latino community leaders from across the state, launched the official campaign to legalize marijuana and focus its efforts through a racial & social justice lens. In partnership with Brave New Films, the campaign launched a video highlighting the racist history of marijuana laws and featured those community leaders who fought for legalization, including SandSJ’s Rev. Dr. Charles Boyer.

“Do we want to be the ones responsible for playing a part in a system that will make tons of young white millionaires after years of making hundreds of thousands of poor Black felons?”

Rev. Dr. Charles F. Boyer

During the video Rev. Boyer demands that we understand marijuana legalization from a moral perspective. "As an African American faith leader, I have seen firsthand how the war on drugs has disproportionately devastated my community even though all communities use marijuana at similar rates. A conviction for marijuana possession can have severe long-term consequences and can make it difficult or impossible to secure employment, housing, student loans, or even a driver's license. Marijuana legalization in New Jersey must address these harms and repair those communities most impacted by our failed marijuana policies."

Throughout the campaign, Rev. Boyer made it abundantly clear that to right the wrongs of the failed War on Drugs, it would need to be the voices of those most impacted to be centered. Black church communities across the entire state discussed the harms of the War on Drugs and what legalization would mean for the liberation of Black people.

At the start of 2018 the political debate around marijuana legalization in New Jersey was heating up and continued to ramp up throughout the year. In January, Bethany Baptist Church hosted a panel discussion on the issue titled "*What's at Stake? Why Marijuana Legalization is a Racial Justice Issue.*" The panelists included Rev. Timothy Jones of Bethany Baptist, Latino Justice PRLDEF President Juan Cartagena, Policy Counsel for ACLU-NJ Dianna Houenou, and two active local community leader voices, Linda McDonald and Mikaaal Godfrey. The major focus of the conversation put a clear spotlight on the need for a new marijuana industry in New Jersey to right the historic wrongs of the failed war on drugs for Black communities. "People of color must not be left behind in the efforts to legalize marijuana," said Rev. Jones. "Legalization... in New Jersey must include automatic and retroactive expungement and resentencing," said DPA-NJ State Director, Roseanne Scott.

In March, [a public forum was held at Bethel AME Church of Woodbury](#) with a panel of experts and local community leaders including Rev. Dr. Charles Boyer, then pastor of the church, Rev. Willie D. Francois III of Mount Zion Baptist Church in Pleasantville, Richard T. Smith of the NAACP New Jersey State Conference, and Gloucester Prosecutor Charles Fiore. The community here spoke about how marijuana laws "target and criminalize Black and brown people and throw them in jail." Many demanded reparations for the generational harm done to their communities. The conversation also highlighted the need for automatic and retroactive expungement and resentencing for those with marijuana arrests, charges, convictions, and criminal records. Most importantly, the discussion uplifted the need for access to the marijuana industry for people of color, including those with prior convictions, and investment of tax revenue generated by marijuana sales back into communities most harmed by prohibition.

During that same month, [an article highlighting Gov. Murphy's commitment to social justice](#) in legalizing marijuana was published by WNYC.

The article highlighted the tensions and arguments from different perspectives of legislators debating the merits and process of legalization for New Jersey.

The late-Senator Ron Rice positioned his fears for legalization squarely within the social justice debate, "...it's being sold on the backs of Black folk and brown people." The concern for large cities, like Newark, was that legal marijuana could proliferate ongoing social ills like heroin addiction and housing crises.

Dianna Houenou of the ACLU-NJ, alongside a statewide coalition of Black pastors, the NAACP, and DPA-NJ countered the argument best by recognizing that "All the collateral consequences that come with an arrest – jail time, losing your job, losing your housing are disproportionately falling on communities of color." The author of the bill to legalize small amounts of marijuana for those over 21 years of age, then-Senator Nicholas Scutari, agreed that marijuana possession arrests were disproportionately higher for Black and Latinos. Loretta Winters of the Gloucester County NAACP demanded that a "huge piece" of the business that legalization would generate should begin the reparations process "for all the pain, suffering, and loss of revenue that our Black and brown communities have been subjected to."

Most poignantly, Rev. Boyer asked the moral question, "**Do we want to be the ones responsible for playing a part in a system that will make tons of young white millionaires after years of making hundreds of thousands of poor Black felons?**"

In April, [a forum on racial justice and marijuana legislation](#) titled "*Set the Captive Free: Marijuana, Morality, & Money*" was hosted by Mount Zion Baptist Church of Pleasantville in partnership with the Atlantic City and Mainland-Pleasantville NAACP branches, the Atlantic County Coalition for a Safe Community, and DPA-NJ. Panelists included Pastor Willie D. Francois of Mt. Zion Baptist, Bishop Robert Hargrove of Christ Care Unit Missionary Baptist and Cathedral of Sicklerville, Rev. Timothy Jones of Bethany Baptist in Newark, and on LaQuay Laun Juel – President of Obsidian Elite Investment Association. Voices from the community echoed similar concerns and demands of the panelists focusing on the need for fair and equitable legalization and repairing past harms to communities of color. Pastor Francois called the war on drugs "a façade war on nonwhite and poor communities" that costs taxpayers millions of dollars and disintegrated people's lives through loss of employment, housing, and unified families. Atlantic City Councilman and President of the Atlantic City NAACP called for a commitment to "stay focused on (the) question of social justice, equity, and reform" when discussing legalization.

In June of 2018, [First Bethel AME Church of Paterson hosted a similar conversation](#) with its community on legalization. The panelists included local business owners, city council members, a representative of the Cannabis Cultural Association, and representatives of the Paterson Police Department. Pastor Allan Boyer of First Bethel emphasized the importance of faith leaders in particular to recognize how marijuana prohibition has negatively impacted our communities.

“We must do everything we can to lift communities of color from the devastation of the war on drugs,” said Boyer. Many community members echoed similar sentiments as shared from other conversations about the need for ultimate reparations in terms of investing cannabis revenue and resources back into impacted Black communities. It is also important to highlight the need for increased employment opportunities within the marijuana industry for those most impacted.

For Juneteenth of the same year, a group of civil rights organizations hosted a teleconference demanding policies including:

- Protections for those who apply for a license or employment in the industry who have prior arrests and/or convictions;
- Access to the industry for individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds, including a path for small business owners and scaled application fees to enter the industry;
- Access to the industry for individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds, including a path for small business owners and scaled application fees to enter the industry;
- Requirement that the state shall actively seek to achieve a diverse industry;
- Provisions intended to repair communities most harmed by marijuana prohibition, including automatic and retroactive expungement and a portion of the tax revenue generated by marijuana legalization reinvested into communities disproportionately harmed by marijuana prohibition; and
- Civil penalties for marijuana activities that occur outside the new legal system to avoid the continuation of a criminal system that disproportionately harms communities of color.

In 2020, when the official ballot initiative to legalize marijuana in New Jersey was up for a vote, [Rev. Charles Boyer held a virtual session](#) with other faith leaders and statewide advocates emphasizing its impact toward “ending the racist cannabis front of the drug war” but with real concerns of how COVID-19 influenced the fight for legalization. “Cannabis legalization has been punted to the voters in a 2020 ballot initiative... What happens to all the racial justice priorities we were fighting for? To complicate matters, the coronavirus has changed everything, even the way we push for justice. It is imperative advocates and lawmakers prioritize racial justice measures even with a ballot and even with the coronavirus.” Rev. Boyer was joined in the conversation by Ami Kachalia, American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey; Pastor Timothy Levi Adkins Jones, Bethany Baptist Church in Newark; Pastor Willie Dwayne Francois, Mount Zion Baptist Church Pleasantville; Pastor Stephen Green, Heard AME Church

Roselle; and Pastor Leslie Harrison, Mount Zion AME Church, Riverton.

Those concerns came to a head just after the election and ballot measure passed by New Jersey voters in November. [During a webinar led by Salvation and Social Justice](#), Rev. Boyer said he did not believe the new cannabis legislation regulating the industry was just. “We wanted to make sure reparations justice was done,” however, Rev. Boyer highlighted that the legislation did not define the term “economically disadvantaged” who are supposed to be most supported when applying for licenses. He called the Senate version of the legislation “the epitome of power and structural racism used once again” to hurt Black communities. The fact that the legislation was proposed mostly by white men which would benefit mostly white men to get rich. “They have 70 percent of the licenses set aside for white folk!” while only 15 percent of licenses are devoted to minorities, even though Blacks and Latinos make up more than 30 percent of the state’s population combined (in 2020). Salvation and Social Justice demanded their allies and community voices collectively advocate for:

- A direct cannabis excise tax to repair harms done by the drug war
- Incentives and lower barriers to enter the market for those with prior convictions
- Financial resources invested in designated impact zones
- Creating an “equity applicant” status
- Expanding licenses from 25% to 33% for equity applicants
- Ensuring at least 10% of each license class be reserved for equity applicants
- Requiring equity applicants have at least 51% of their entity owned by minorities
- Creating a racial impact analysis alongside an economic impact statement

To ensure this work alongside community continued after legalization was secured, the only logical course of action was to continue conversations both regarding the problems and the solutions with impacted communities. Countless scholars and myriad literature discuss the long-term and sustainable impact of impacted communities incorporated into decision making processes (Renn et al, 1993; Bishop & Davis, 2002; Blair, 2004; Skelcher et al, 2011; IAP2, 2018). Intentionally having the conversations about the emerging cannabis industry in New Jersey with impact zones would show the up-close-and-personal perspective of how the war on drugs has impacted these communities. Furthermore, those conversations would outline just how the community anticipated potential influences in neighborhood dynamics, local politics, youth engagement, and community economic development overall.

In the summer of 2021, SandSJ conducted 4 two-hour long visioning sessions with Millville and Trenton – two communities majorly devastated by the war on drugs and both of which are impact zones under the new cannabis legislation. The approach facilitated an atmosphere that encouraged listening directly to these communities, documenting their unique views, opinions, & ideas, and collaborating alongside them to develop actionable solutions to encourage corporate social responsibility with all future enterprises entering their city with plans to establish within the emerging cannabis industry.

By requesting faith-based leaders to find community residents/leaders in their communities, our process ensured the community was directly recruited from those who understood the context and experiences of people impacted by the drug war. Other participants and community leaders who could also speak on the effects of the drug war, poverty, and/or over policing in their neighborhoods, but may not have had a first-hand experience themselves, also heavily participated in these discussions and the process.

All four community visioning sessions took place over the course of two weeks between Wednesday, August 11th and Monday, August 23rd and were well attended, interactive, and enlightening. Given increasing COVID restrictions at the start of the project, it was recommended that the only first session take place in person for both groups to enhance the interactive experience of the asset mapping activity.

The asset maps were digitized through the online platform “Padlet,” and all groups have been given access to continually adapt their asset maps as solutions develop. During the first session, groups were encouraged to brainstorm potential solutions to the problems, issues, and challenges they identified. During the second session a handful of those potential solutions were developed after the group received training on strategic action plan (SAP) development. These training courses were not as in-depth as normal because of time, but more than enough basic components were built into the SAPs to refine and continue developing into sustainable community-based solutions.

Many comments and thoughts shared surrounded the focus of **families**, whether that be to bring them together or how drugs and the drug war has torn families apart in these communities. As can be seen in the list of potential solutions as well as the deeper context to the strategic action plans developed, the family unit and its stability is a major goal of any meaningful community-based work with these cities. Additionally, there is a strong sense of urgency to support and encourage community **youth**. The context around the family discussion hits home particularly for younger people in Millville and Trenton because of their vulnerability and impressionability. Gang life in both the neighborhoods and in schools are a reality for young people, ultimately leading to more negative than positive outcomes including but not limited to **imprisonment**.

Surrounding these conversations, particularly around youth but also in general, is the topic of **health** and the effects the drug war has plagued on these cities mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Though not fully developed, this is evident in SAP #2 for the Trenton group, work focused on mental health resources for city youth. Discussion of holistic care around concepts such as trauma and depression are vital to any developed solution for both communities, and this will take meaningful partnership with other organizations and groups.

Much of the trauma discussed did not seem to be so much connected to crime as it was connected to poor quality **policing** in local neighborhoods. Many instances of abuse, neglect, and apathy from local police departments to nurture a safe and engaging environment create lasting negative impacts in these communities. The community sees these impacts clearly, creating a distrust in local police as well as larger **justice and judicial systems**. Participants discussed their extensive knowledge of and practice within fields of law, justice, and public safety understanding that many people in their communities do not receive the same level or quality of resources as other towns or individuals do.

Finally, and connected to larger systems, a need to bridge connections with **government officials** seems an important component of developing sustainable solutions for these communities. There is an understood need that local governments should represent community voices more through increased **accountability** measures, stronger economic and financial distribution, and partnership with corporations or other potential developers. It should be noted that on more than a few occasions in the Millville session participants were wary of additional community work with other organizations. In previous cases of project implementation such as this, many of the same actors are the ones that receive the resources needed to put plans into place and often do so poorly or not at all. The **local economy** that exists within these communities currently is controlled by a select few with little concern or consideration for long-term community needs. Justice-oriented and equitable community-based work must consider the need for restructuring in how resources & assets are created, accrued, allocated, and distributed with the people most impacted at the center.


These crucial voices of those most harmed by the failed war on drugs were crucial pieces to the puzzle in formulating a powerful policy advocacy campaign. SandSJ was proud to be the forefront of these efforts in constantly pressuring the State Legislature to ensure equitable regulation measures after New Jersey residents voted yes to the legal use of recreational marijuana by ballot initiative in 2020. Since then, there is still much needed work to be done, in particular around automatic record clearance and expungement, but without SandSJ’s forceful advocacy and intentional centering of impacted voices we would not have been able to make such noble strides toward liberation for Black people in New Jersey.



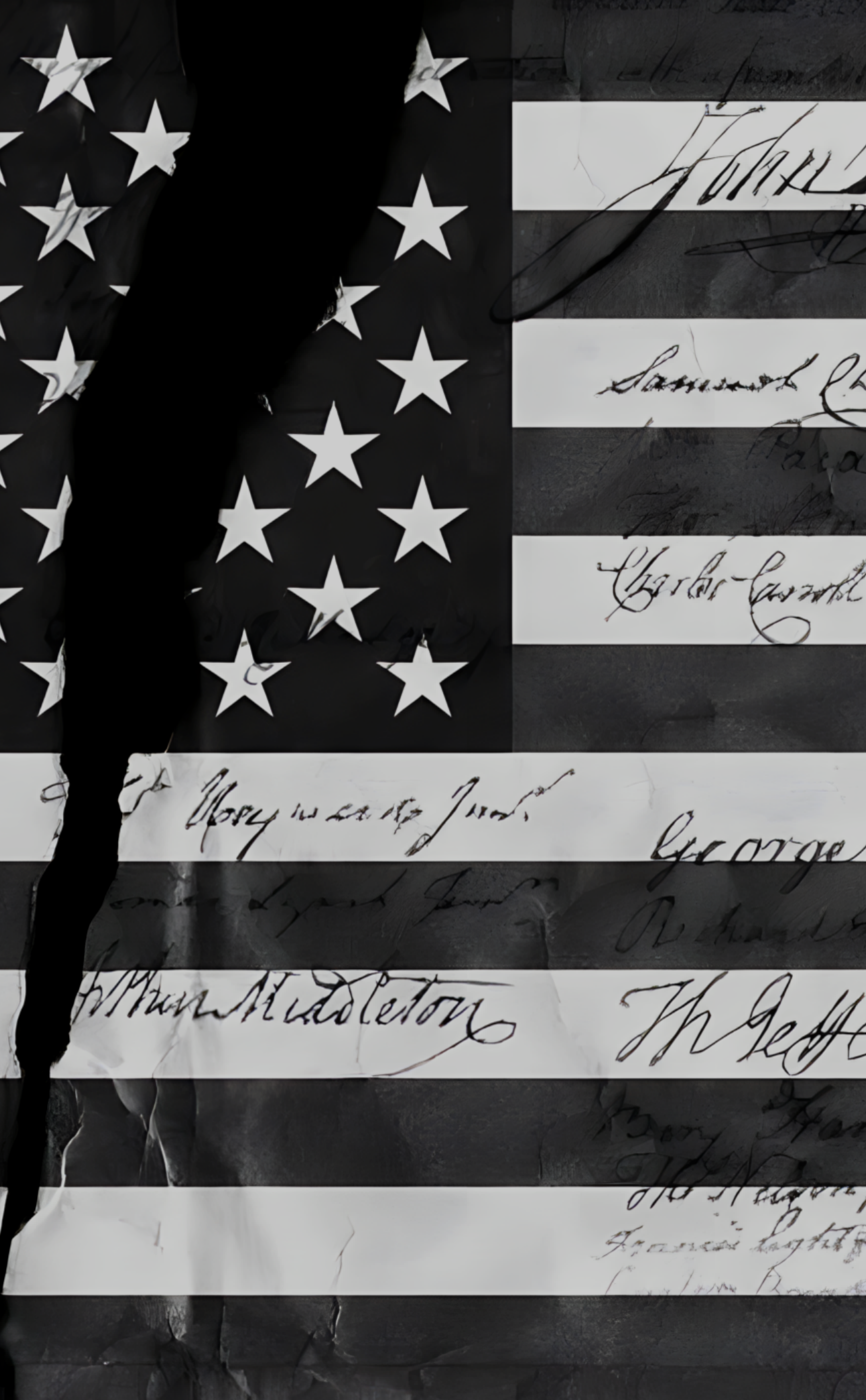
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POLICY



According to a 2021 report published by New Jersey Policy Perspective, New Jersey spent at least \$11.6 billion between the years of 2010-2019 enforcing the War on Drugs. That's \$1.2 billion annually. According to that same report, in 2019 the state's investment on the drug war was 8.5 times greater than the state's investments in addiction services and 27.9 times greater than the spending on rental assistance, homeless shelters and homelessness prevention services.

The damage caused by the War on Drugs to Black communities cannot be overstated. Staggering legal costs, thousands of dollars in fines and fees, costs incurred on commissaries and prison calls, as well as weekly commutes to visit incarcerated loved ones are just some of the consequences of decades long punitive and racist drug policies. We may never be able to quantify the costs associated with barriers to voting, public assistance, child custody, financial aid, housing and employment which amounts to generations of economic opportunity and growth thwarted.

It's been more than 50 years since former President Richard Nixon launched his War on Drugs and 38 years since the policies like the 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act created a 100 to 1 disparity between the amount of crack cocaine that triggers a federal mandatory minimum sentence compared to that of powder cocaine crippling Black communities throughout this nation. More than 50 years and it would appear that scholars, advocates and many elected officials are finally in agreement about this one fact...the war on drugs has failed. In recent years, with the rise of white deaths due to the opioid epidemic, we have noticed a national narrative shift around the issue of drug use. What was once regarded as a scourge to be stopped at all costs is now seen as a public health crisis that must be remedied.

Despite some narrative shifts and collective accord that we as a society can no longer incarcerate our way out of this issue, states like New Jersey continue to meet drug use with a carceral response further perpetuating the disproportionate targeting and harm of Black communities.

New Jersey purports to be progressive and diverse in both people and viewpoints. However, the state also holds some of the highest racial disparities in the nation. In New Jersey, Black residents are incarcerated at a rate of 12.5 times that of white residents. While Black people make up just 15 percent of the population in the state, we represent 43% of the arrests for drug violations even though there is no evidence that Black people use drugs at a higher rate than white people.



Credit: Chloe Zola

POLICY GAINS

Cannabis Decriminalization & the Fight for Equity and Representation

Salvation and Social Justice in partnership with Black faith and community leaders, advocate partners and directly impacted folks led the campaign for cannabis decriminalization in New Jersey. In 2020, after years of legislative failures, New Jersey residents voted yes to the legal use of recreational marijuana by ballot initiative. The social and political climate of the time contributed to the wide margins by which the ballot question passed. The nation was in the throes of COVID 19 pandemic (New Jersey having some of the highest rate of fatalities); there was a racial reckoning due to the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police and a wave of unjustified police killings; and by in large communities were becoming more aware of the disproportionate number of arrests for cannabis and the over policing of Black communities related to this substance.

While a lengthy and contentious process, once lawmakers and state officials began taking steps to establish rules and regulations the efforts to end the war on drugs by supporting the bill to end the criminalization of cannabis was well underway.

One of our primary objectives with this bill was to see deep investments in Black communities. With more than 6 million arrests between 2000-2010, a price tag of billions spent fighting the drug war fought hardest in Black communities, and Black residents being 3.6 times more likely to be arrested for marijuana possession than white residents, advocates understood that cannabis decriminalization was not merely a criminal legal fight, but one of reparative justice.

As the culture around cannabis evolved, what was once demonized has found an economic foothold in the market generating more than \$20 billion in tax revenue. The writing was on the wall... while hundreds and thousands of Black bodies languished in prisons due to prohibition, hundreds of white men were slated to become millionaires.

In our collective advocacy with our partners, we were adamant that cannabis legislation center reparative justice by ensuring that **70% of sales tax revenue and a social equity excise tax** be included in the legislation directly funding programs designed to better serve the communities most impacted by the drug war. This was a long-fought battle. Salvation and Social Justice opposed earlier iterations of the cannabis bill because it lacked firm language that guaranteed that funding from the excise tax would be reliably allocated to directly impacted communities. Our **advocacy shut the legislature down multiple times until they included equity**. In the end, it was the unwavering spirit of advocates, the leadership of **Senator Troy Singleton** and **Senator Teresa Ruiz** and their relentless push for sales tax provisions; **Assemblyman Jamel Holley** who fought for racial justice

provisions; **Speaker Craig Coughlin's** support for the social equity excise tax; and **Governor Murphy's commitment** to racial justice provisions in legalization that got New Jersey over the finish line.

While we celebrate the victory that was cannabis decriminalization and legalization, SandSJ's advocacy continues to be instrumental in ensuring equity and representation throughout the entire process. That advocacy extended into ensuring that there was adequate Black representation on the Cannabis Regulatory Commission (CRC). The first announcement of the CRC in February 2021 failed to include a single Black man on the commission. Our advocacy was instrumental in righting that wrong, and today the CRC exists as an inclusive body lending a strong voice for impacted communities and ensuring that the state prioritizes wealth building opportunities for Black businesses.

The decriminalization and legalization of cannabis in New Jersey was a critical first step in ending a long, ineffective and devastating war on drugs. Prior to legalization in 2021, there were more than 36,000 marijuana related arrests made each year. *In their report A Tale of Two Countries: Racially Targeted Arrests in the Era of Marijuana Reform*, the ACLU-NJ reports that New Jersey ranked 11 for the highest rate of arrests of Black people for marijuana possession and eighth in the nation per 100,000 people. On the heels of legalization between the years 2010-2018, New Jersey saw an increase of 45.6 percent in its rate of marijuana possession arrests, which existed as the ninth highest increase in the nation at the time.

The sheer magnitude of its impact on Black residents in this state coupled with tremendous state spending and reckless zeal in which drug policies were enforced reinforces that legalization is far more than a criminal legal or commercial market issue, rather it is a matter of **reparations**. For Black communities in this state, there isn't an area of life that hasn't been irrevocably altered because of harmful drug policies. Policies that have fueled blight, disinvestment and the collapse of critical infrastructure within our communities. Infrastructures that would otherwise support safe and affordable housing have been compromised. Infrastructure that would support quality education, career opportunities, economic mobility, and holistic health and wellness have been obliterated.

Decriminalization of all drugs is now the next step to reparative justice, and it is under this framework that our policy gains extend to include but are not limited to **sentencing reform, restoration of voting rights and economic reinvestments** into the businesses, communities and individuals directly impacted by the War on Drugs.

Voter Restoration

In New Jersey, Black people make up 54% of those incarcerated- the highest disparity anywhere in the nation between Blacks and whites in our jails and prisons. Draconian drug policies are at the core of these disparities. For decades punitive race-based drug policies have decimated entire communities through mass

criminalization and civic disenfranchisement by revoking voter rights.

In 2019, Assembly Bill 5823 was signed into law restoring the voting rights of 83,000 formerly incarcerated residents. SandSJ in an effort led by the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice (NJISJ) advocated for and won the fight to secure the fundamental right to vote for communities that had been disproportionately targeted and affected by voting prohibition.

And while we acknowledge how important a victory this legislation is, advocates understand that there is still tremendous work to be done to redress existing disparities within the carceral systems. Systemic racism within our criminal legal system makes Black incarcerated persons less likely to be released on parole or receive probation sentences in lieu of excessive jail time, thereby continuing to fortify existing barriers between tens of thousands of individuals with felony convictions and their enfranchisement. Advocate communities continue the fight for civil rights until voting rights have been fully restored.

Racial Impact Statements

In 2017, The Anti-Poverty Network released a report called “The Uncomfortable Truth, Racism, Injustice and Poverty in New Jersey.” The report identifies the linkage between institutional racism and chronic poverty and the ways in which this racism infects every facet of society including but not limited to housing, education, environment, health care, economics and interactions within the criminal legal system. The report offered 5 recommendations in response to its findings, however most notable was the need for racial impact statements of all legislations and regulations in the state. Salvation and Social Justice’s Founder and Executive Director, Rev Dr. Charles F Boyer, sat on the board of the Anti-Poverty Network and used this recommendation to launch Salvation and Social Justice’s legislative campaign requiring that New Jersey have racial impact statements developed for proposed criminal justice legislation.

In 2018, the legislature passed Senate Bill 677, which requires that the Office of Legislative Services prepare racial impact statements for policy changes that affect pretrial detention, sentencing and parole.

Community-Led Public Safety

In January 2022, Salvation and Social Justice was awarded \$500,000 from the Office of the Attorney General establishing Salvation and Social Justice’s Restorative Justice Hub which includes a violence interruption street team. Salvation and Social Justice’s Restorative Street Team is a dedicated group of system impacted, professionally trained conflict resolution specialists

committed to building a safe and healthy community by employing community led, holistic approaches to address community issues.

In 2023, Salvation and Social Justice advocated for the introduction of Assembly Bill 5326, which would establish community led response team pilot programs that would serve as an alternative to police response for non-violent, substance use, and mental and behavioral health calls. A5326 which expands support and resources to organizations such as the Trenton Restorative Street Team, Newark Community Street Team and Paterson Healing Collective successfully passed the New Jersey General Assembly in June 2023 and makes its way to the Senate for introduction.

SandSJ is committed to seeing community-led responses to substance use, non-coercive treatment options, and compassionate public health response that include, but are not limited to, evidence-based intervention practices, restorative justice and violence prevention, and investments in social services such as housing and reentry services. **The Trenton Restorative Street Team is an example of how we can transform the ways in which we deal with harm to centering community investment over violent and oppressive law enforcement practices.**

Salvation and Social Justice’s policy agenda highlights a track record of community accomplishments and political gains that is the culmination of collective action centering those closest to the problem and activating liberative faith. This direct linkage of Black faith and resistance against state sponsored racial violence, is woven into the DNA of New Jersey’s Black liberation efforts. This racial violence can be seen in every area of Black life and extends into the state’s drug policies where Black people are disproportionately targeted for enforcement and subject to harsher treatment within the criminal legal system. The Black Church has fought to free Black people from colonizing forces since the beginning. That fight continues as we work to abolish drug policy in our state while creating alternative community led solutions.

POLICY GOALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our goals to advance policy agendas on the issue of decriminalization and the restoration of our communities include:

1. Adopting legislation that would decriminalize personal use drugs in the state
2. Reinvestment of Cannabis Revenue and Opioid Funds to resource community programs and state support
3. Implement and expand clean slate expungement
4. Establish Community Led Alternative Response Pilot Programs throughout New Jersey

RECOMMENDATION #1

Adopting legislation that would decriminalize personal use drugs in the state

There is overwhelming evidence that demonstrates that criminalization of drugs is neither effective in deterring use nor is it rooted in any data-based evidence. Criminalization has never worked, yet despite its ineffectiveness and cost to the state and vulnerable communities, lawmakers continue to exhibit an overreliance on punitive responses to what amounts to a public health issue. Enforcement of existing policies leads to disproportionate surveillance of Black communities, higher rates of arrest and harsher sentences in comparison to white residents.

We recommend the adoption of statute that would decriminalize personal use drugs in the state by removing all civil and criminal penalties associated with its possession, and instead replacing those penalties with harm reduction services.

RECOMMENDATION #2

Reinvestment of cannabis revenue and opioid funds to resource community programs and state support

Despite being a tremendous victory in the fight for cannabis legalization the **70% sales tax and social equity excise tax clause of the statute**, was but one step in the fight to repair the decades long war on drugs on Black communities throughout this state. In order to ensure that the communities most harmed are now impacted in a substantive way, then the state must support the following:

- See to it that community voices are amplified during all stages of the reinvestment process. The CRC held public hearings throughout the state presenting the opportunity for community members to weigh in on how they believe cannabis revenue should be spent in their communities.
- Provide Black applicants with access to startup capital through investment grants in order to participate in the market
- Provide access to training, technical assistance and education for those looking to gain entry into the market.

In March 2022, New Jersey announced that it would receive \$641 million from the \$26 billion federal opioid settlement against Johnson and Johnson and the three largest pharmaceutical distributors in the nation. While half of this money will go to the state, the other half is to be distributed throughout local governments in an effort to address the harm caused by the opioid epidemic. Like cannabis revenue dollars, our advocacy in this space involves significant community investments to repair the harms committed through punitive policy. We at SandSJ encourage the state to invest opioid settlement monies toward the following:

- **Violence interruption, harm reduction and restorative justice hubs as an effective and preventative mechanism to keep residents safe and interrupt the racial disparities within the carceral system.** Specifically, an \$80 million investment in restorative justice hub pilot programs and violence interruption work over the next three years. These investments would offer wrap around services for at risk youth in target cities and reduce initial and repeat contact with the youth justice system. Programs should have consistent funding and should not have to reapply for funding each year. Investments should continue to support the establishment of critical harm reduction centers.
- **\$20 million investment in community led first response pilot programs throughout targeted pilot cities.** These community led first response teams would serve as an alternative to law enforcement response for nonviolent, substance use, behavioral and mental health calls. In previous years, the state's police budget has far exceeded that of the Dept of Health, informing the state's approach to substance use calls and further criminalizing what is a public health issue. Investment in these pilots would be an investment in healthier and safer New Jersey communities.

- **\$75 million towards neighborhood maternal health centers in cities experiencing a birthing desert.** Funding supports preventative, perinatal and postpartum care; addresses the needs of pregnant women with opioid or substance use disorder; and advances the quality of services provided to improve health outcomes and reduce maternal morbidity. The decades long war on drugs have adversely affected Black families, and in a state where Black women are 7 times more likely than white women to die before or after giving birth due to racism and bias at hospitals and clinics, it is critical that significant investments be made to ensure that Black mothers are receiving quality, necessary and lifesaving medical services.

RECOMMENDATION #3

Implement and expand clean slate expungement

In 2019, Governor Murphy signed into law Senate Bill 4154 known as Clean Slate Expungement as part of his broader Second Chances Agenda. S4154 created a petition process allowing individuals who have not committed an offense within 10 years (and have not been convicted of the most serious crimes) to have multiple charges sealed electronically without charge. The statute also goes on to require that low level marijuana convictions be sealed upon the disposition of a case, removing the barriers to housing, education and employment that would otherwise exist without it. Perhaps the most important aspect of the bill includes the provision that requires the State to implement an automated expungement process, thereby removing the onus on the part of the individual to navigate an otherwise challenging system.

Despite automatic clearance being among the most crucial aspects of the statute, we see the state experiencing significant challenges in these areas. Salvation and Social Justice held a series of visioning sessions around clean slate expungement at which time directly impacted community members shared the challenges they experienced navigating the expungement process which include but are not limited to:

- Having to seek out their criminal records and the hardships associated with that process;
- Limited or unreliable sources of information on the expungement process across networks and agencies; and
- Inadequate outreach on the part of the state to offer public education and resources.

Based on the lived experiences of directly impacted folks we have developed the following as potential ways in which clean slate can be effectively implemented and expanded throughout the state.

1. Ensuring that those with lived experiences are given a seat at the table when considering paths forward with clean slate implementation as it is invaluable to ensuring that policies meet the realities of lived experiences.
2. There needs to be increased access to digital platforms and the development of a centralized site so that individuals can pursue the expungement process with little toil.
3. Build out stronger support networks for reentry to ensure that there are an adequate number of experts on expungement to satisfy the pool of eligible applicants seeking relief.
4. Share expungement information well before release from prison/jail so that one can begin to prepare themselves for the process.
5. Expand statute to offer relief to larger pool of potential candidates. Current legislation in New Jersey is only for low level cases. To properly redress the disproportionate enforcement of cannabis prohibition policies on Black communities, then statute cannot be limited to merely possession, rather it should extend to higher level charges.

RECOMMENDATION #4

Establish community led alternative response pilot programs throughout New Jersey

We encourage legislators to adopt policy that establishes community response teams as an alternative to law enforcement responses for nonviolent substance use, behavioral and mental health calls. Community response teams would serve as mental health and crisis intervention first responders that would rely heavily on highly trained professionals other than police. Community response teams have been proven to be effective tools in violence interruption as well as limiting unnecessary and harmful interactions between police and communities of color.

For more than a year, SandSJ has advocated for the Legislature to adopt policy that would establish community led first response teams. Data shows that most 911 calls have nothing to do with crime and therefore do not require a police response. Too often, police responses for mental health and substance use calls prove to not only be inappropriate but ineffective and more likely to result in an escalation. Black

residents in New Jersey are three times more likely to face police force than white residents despite being less likely to confront law enforcement than white residents.

In June of 2023, Assembly Bill 5326 successfully passed the Assembly and now advocate communities are calling for its introduction and advancement in the Senate. A5326 follows the community led models seen in programs such as CAHOOTS out of Eugene, Oregon; STAR out of Denver, Colorado; and CRESS out of Amherst, Massachusetts. All programs have had a documented record of success, and this bill would be in alignment with the models that have been proven to work throughout the nation and in New Jersey cities like Trenton, Newark and Paterson.

CALL TO ACTION

- Support SandSJ's policy recommendations regarding decriminalization by sharing this toolkit and having conversations among faith leaders and houses of worship
- Contact legislator and tell them to do the following:
 - Decriminalize all drugs and prioritize health and community led approaches to support people rather than incarcerate them.
 - Advance and pass legislation that would establish community led response team pilot programs throughout the state
- Sign up to stay connected with SandSJ to learn more about decriminalization and what you can do to support
- Encourage faith leaders and congregants to sign on to letter urging legislative leadership to decriminalize drugs in New Jersey

COMMUNITY LED FIRST RESPONSE

Script

Hello, my name is [insert name], and I am a constituent from [insert town/state]. I am calling to urge you to support the introduction of a Senate companion bill to Assembly bill 5326, which passed the Assembly in June 2023. This bill would support significant investments in community led response pilots that would serve as an alternative to law enforcement responses for nonviolent substance use, behavioral and mental health calls.

The presence of community response teams has proven to be more effective in violence interruption and limiting unnecessary and harmful interaction between police and Black communities.

A significant investment in community led first response pilot programs would be an investment in healthier and safer New Jersey communities.

I am urging you to take action on this important issue.

I may be reached at [insert phone number].

Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter.

DRUG DECRIMINALIZATION

Script

Hello, my name is [insert name], and I am a constituent from [insert town/state]. I am calling to urge you to adopt legislation that would decriminalize all personal use drugs and prioritize health and community led approaches to support people rather than incarcerate them.

Despite evidence showing that imprisonment is an ineffective deterrent to drug use and only further exacerbates the social and economic hardships that drive individuals to self-medicate through illicit drugs, New Jersey's investment in drug enforcement has far exceeded its investment in addiction services, rental assistance, homeless shelters and homelessness prevention services.

If we are serious about the health and wellness of our communities, then we must put an end to punitive policies and in its place support policy that approaches drug use from a harm reduction and restorative justice framework as well as prioritizes reinvestment in communities most harmed by those very policies. For too long, this state has assumed a punitive approach to what amounts to a public health issue. This needs to change.

I am urging you to take action on this important issue.

I may be reached at [insert phone number].

Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter.

October 9, 2023

Senate President Scutari
Assembly Speaker Coughlin
Majority Leaders Ruiz and Greenwald

RE: [ADD TITLE HERE]

Dear Senator / Representative/ Assembly _____;

We, the undersigned, represent faith leaders, congregants, community members, advocates and people of conscience of this great state. As such, we feel compelled to express our concern over the lack of movement on the part of the Legislature to enact meaningful and substantive policy that addresses the critically important issue of drug use in this state and the harms committed by way of punitive government policy. We are calling for policies that shift from a crime and punishment framework to one of harm reduction and repair. In order to accomplish this, there must be an acknowledgment of the root causes of drug use (i.e. state divestment in social structure, absence of economic opportunity, financial hardships and absence of safe and affordable housing) as well as the state's racist and punitive policies and methods of enforcement. The war on drugs has been nothing more than a war on Black bodies in this state. The damage caused by mass incarceration will take generations to undo, but New Jersey can take the first steps to redress these harms by doing the following:

We are calling for the Legislature to adopt policy that would decriminalize the use and possession of personal use amounts of drugs. For too long, this state has assumed a punitive approach to what amounts to a public health issue. Evidence shows that imprisonment is an ineffective deterrent to drug use and only further exacerbates the social and economic hardships that drive individuals to self-medicate through illicit drugs. If we are serious about the health and wellness of our communities, then we must abolish punitive policies and in its place support policy that approaches drug use from a harm reduction and restorative justice framework as well as prioritizes reinvestment in communities most harmed by those very policies.

We are also calling on the Legislature to expand the statute on clean slate expungement to offer relief to a larger pool of eligible candidates. In 2019, the legislature passed Senate Bill 4154, which created a petition process for clean slate expungement for certain New Jersey residents who had not committed an offense in 10 years. Despite its significance and the potential to enfranchise thousands of residents whose lives have been marred by incarceration, the state has experienced significant stalls in its implementation. In order to adequately redress the damage that has been done to Black communities through the War on Drugs, not only must existing statute be extended to include higher level offenses, but there must be intentional steps taken on the part of the state to ensure the seamless navigation of the automated expungement system.

Lastly, we are calling for legislators to adopt policy that establishes Community Led Response Teams as an alternative to law enforcement responses to nonviolent substance use, behavioral and mental health calls. Community response teams would serve as a mental health and crisis intervention first responders that would rely heavily on highly trained professionals other than police. What we are calling for is not a co responder model but rather a model that is led and informed by the community, free of law enforcement presence or interference. Community Response Teams have proven to be effective tools in violence interruption as well as limiting unnecessary and harmful interactions between police and communities of color.

In June of 2023, Assembly Bill 5326, which would establish community led first response team pilot programs in targeted cities throughout the state, successfully passed the Assembly and now advocate communities are calling for its introduction and advancement in the Senate. A5326 follows the community led models seen in programs such as CAHOOTS out of Eugene, Oregon; STAR out of Denver, Colorado; and CRESS out of Amherst, Massachusetts. All programs have had a documented record of success, and this bill would be in alignment with the models that have been proven to work throughout the nation and in New Jersey cities like Trenton, Newark and Paterson.

Between the years 2010-2019, New Jersey spent at least \$11.6 billion enforcing the war on drugs. That's \$1.2 billion annually. In 2019, the state's investment on the war on drugs was 8.5 times greater than the state's investments in addiction services and 27.9 times greater than the spending on rental assistance, homeless shelters and homelessness prevention services.

This state has spent an enormous amount of money combatting the so called war on drugs and what do we have to show for it? New Jersey exists as one of the most inequitable states in the nation, and Black communities are disproportionately subjected to over surveillance, police use of force, arrest and incarceration. Black residents are more than 3 times likely to be arrested for drug violations than their white counterparts, despite white people using and selling drugs at higher rates.

Criminalization has never worked, and if we are serious about the health and safety of New Jersey residents, we need more policies that recognize and center the humanity of all people. Policies committed to solving the problems rather than exacerbating already existing problems. Drug use and distribution in our communities are most prevalent when communities lack adequate housing, healthcare, education, resources and economic opportunities. Rather than attempting to incarcerate our way to public safety we should be advancing the aforementioned polices and investing in increased services for communities by funding harm reduction efforts.

We stand collectively with and in support of these communities who are most vulnerable and most impacted by draconian policies and its disproportionate enforcement. Our ask to you is simple. We ask that you honor your commitment to make New Jersey a more just, more fair and more equitable state. Let's learn from our mistakes rather than repeat them. The time is now for the state to assume bold, courageous and necessary leadership that New Jerseyans were promised and deserve.

Sincerely,

(Sign and print your name and remember to include your address)

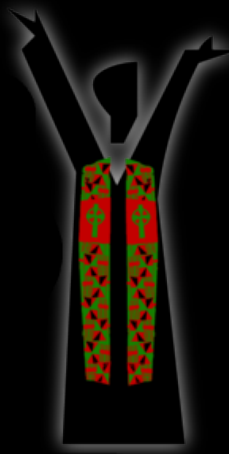
(Sign and print your name and remember to include your address)

**** FIND AND CONTACT YOUR STATE LEGISLATORS HERE [HTTPS://WWW.NJLEG.STATE.NJ.US/LEGISLATIVE-ROSTER](https://www.njleg.state.nj.us/legislative-roster)**

MERCH FOR THE CHURCH

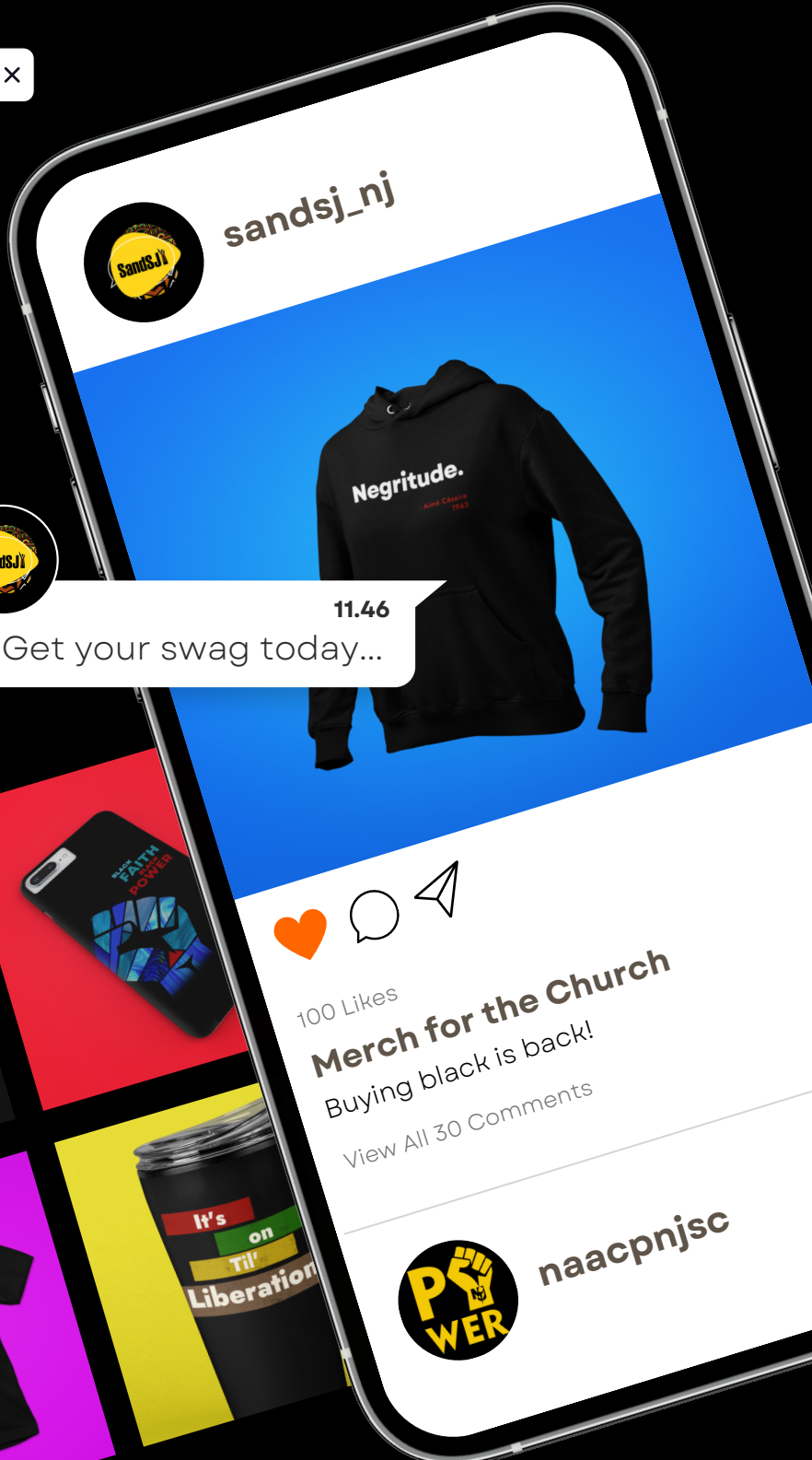
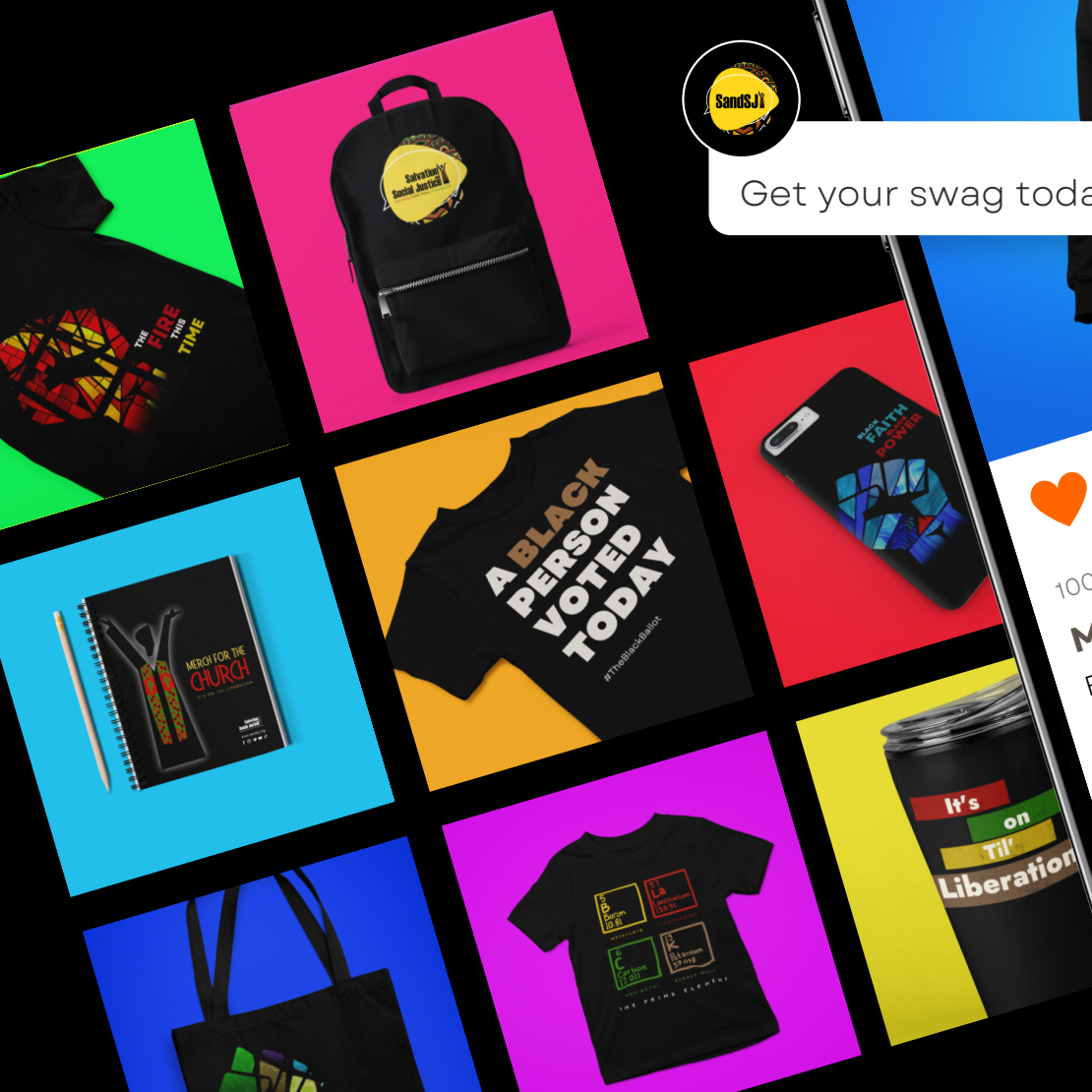
IT'S ON 'TIL LIBERATION

Salvation and Social Justice
Liberating Public Policy Theologically



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MEDIA KIT

MESSAGING THAT MOVES

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Typography

Jost

Aa Light

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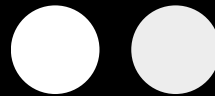
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The Color

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Secondary



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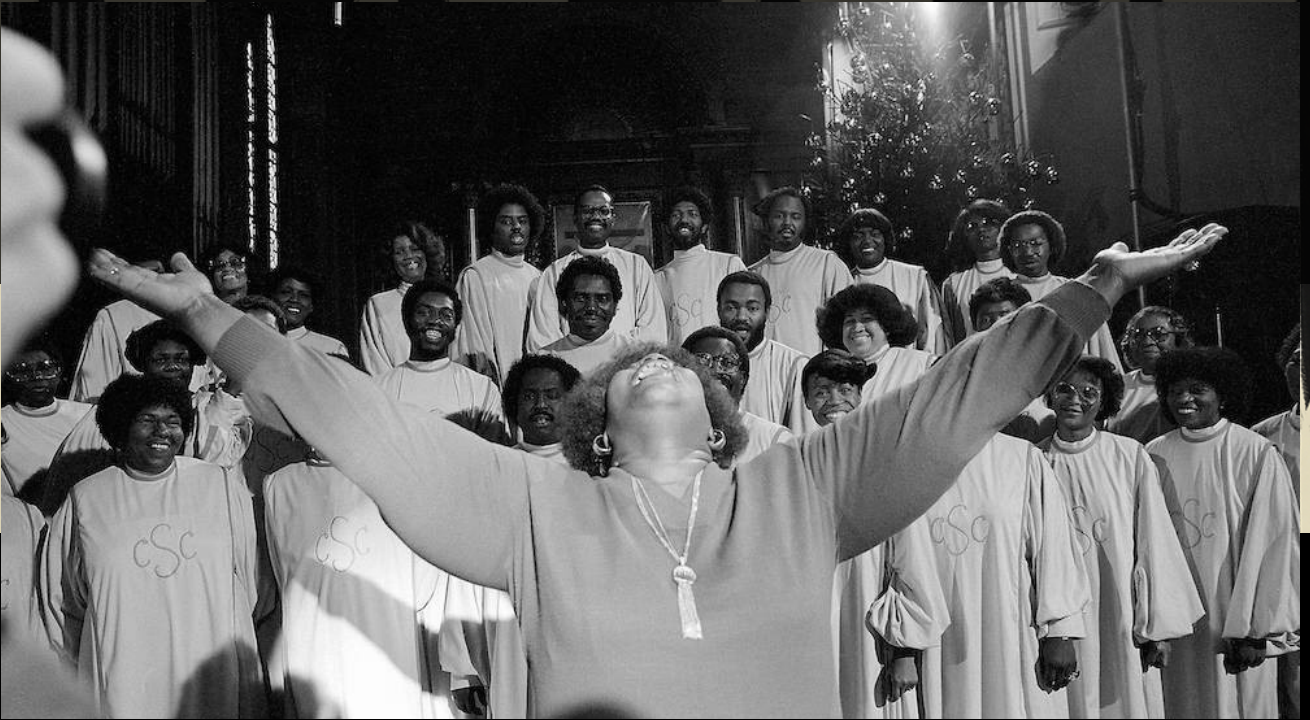


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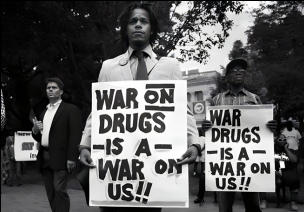
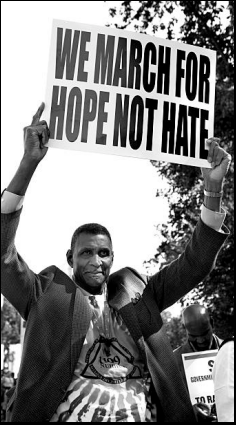
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Patterns





Photos



STOP

CIRCLE TIME

#RESTORATIVEJUSTICE

#PROMOTINGPEACE



Salvation
and
Social Justice 
Liberating Public Policy Theologically

www.sandsj.org



SOCIAL MEDIA POST

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#ABOLISHTHEDRUGWAR
#SUPPORTDONTPUNISH
#HARMREDUCTION
#SUPPORTDONTPUNISH
#WARONDRUGS
#DRUGPOLICY
#YOUOWEUS
#RETURNANDRESTORE

In order to repair Black communities after more than 50 years of a devastating and failed War on Drugs, there must be significant investments in comprehensive community programs. These communities deserve reinvestment NOW [#Hashtag](#)

We need the reinvestment of Cannabis Revenue and Opioid Funds to support programs in Black communities most impacted by the Drug War. When our communities thrive, everyone thrives. [#Hashtag](#)

The Black Church has been a cultural and community center for generations. Black churches are uniquely positioned to support their communities because they have a long history of organizing and mobilizing strong and expansive networks of faith leaders, congregants and businesses. [#Hashtag](#)

The communities most harmed by drug prohibition are also the ones least likely to benefit from the growing marketplace. Investing in these communities is investing in a more just and equitable New Jersey. [#Hashtag](#)

You Owe Us! National Expungement Week highlights the need for reforms in New Jersey's expungement process. People who have been incarcerated should have their voice heard in policies that most impact them. [#Hashtag](#)

The Drug War has disproportionately impacted Black communities, resulting in generations of harm committed against Black families while fueling structurally racist systems. Significant state investments in these communities is a crucial step towards dismantling these violent systems. [#Hashtag](#)

Acknowledgment of the failed war on drugs and its devastating consequences, requires intentional action on the part of the State to invest in communities disproportionately harmed. By directing our support towards services that build up these communities, we can break the cycle of inequity and create a brighter future for all. [#Hashtag](#)

By advocating for the decriminalization of drugs that have disproportionately affected Black communities, we strive to dismantle a racist criminal legal system that wages war on Black bodies subjecting them to perpetual cycles of incarceration, degradation and disenfranchisement [#Hashtag](#)

Advocating for the decriminalization of drugs that have disproportionately affected Black communities: It is essential to rectify the historical injustices and systemic biases that perpetuate unequal treatment. [#Hashtag](#)

Draconian drug laws, especially those in New Jersey, have been at the helm of the over policing, disparate arrests, prosecution, incarceration, and disenfranchisement of Black communities. We must end the Drug War NOW [#Hashtag](#)

Supporting and encouraging Black youth is a top priority for Black communities most harmed by the Drug War. Providing educational and family support resources can help them thrive after being torn down for so long. [#Hashtag](#)

Establishing Community-Led First Response Programs in Black communities around New Jersey allows the community to respond to mental health, behavioral health and substance use crises without interference from police. [#Hashtag](#)

Prioritizing the well-being and empowerment of historically marginalized, Black communities most affected by the failed war on drugs is not only a moral obligation but also a strategic move towards a more just and equitable society. [#Hashtag](#)

We are calling to decriminalize the use and possession of personal use amounts of all drugs. We call to have punitive drug laws abolished, and in its place, we support policy that approaches drug use from a place of harm reduction and restorative justice while prioritizing reinvestments into communities most harmed [#Hashtag](#)

For more than 50 years, the United States government has launched a racist and ineffective War on Drugs which has been nothing more than a war on Black communities. We are advocating for the decriminalization of personal use drugs to stop the disproportionate over-policing and incarceration of our communities. [#Hashtag](#)

While Black people make up just 15 percent of New Jersey's population, we represent 43% of the arrests for drug violations even though there is no evidence that Black people use drugs at a higher rate than white people. [#Hashtag](#)

The imperative of decriminalizing drugs that have disproportionately impacted Black communities lies in the pursuit of social justice and equity, aiming to rectify the historical and systemic injustices perpetuated by the war on drugs. [#Hashtag](#)

SALVATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

PULPIT TOOLKITS



Our **pulpit toolkits** are a "one-stop shop" for information, resources, and action that the Black Church can leverage to create lasting change in their local fights for social justice.

www.sandsj.org

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Salvation
and
Social Justice
Liberating Public Policy Theologically



PREACHERS & THE PEWES 33

THEOLOGICAL, BIBLICAL, AND LITURGICAL RESOURCES

SCRIPTURES

God's Concern for Justice, the Poor, and the "Least of These"

LUKE 10: 25-37 (NIV)

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

25 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

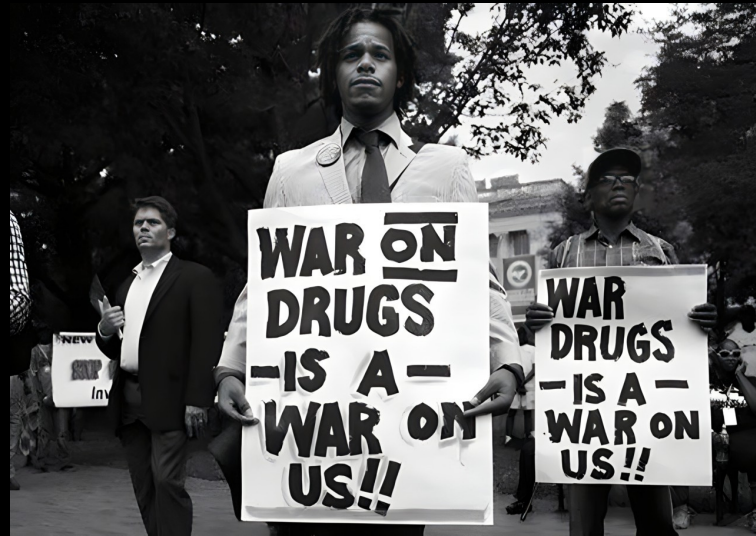
26 "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

27 He answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'^[a]; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'^[b]"

28 "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

30 In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.



31 A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side.

32 So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

33 But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.

34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him.

35 The next day he took out two denarii^[c] and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

36 "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

37 The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."



ISAIAH 58: 1-12 (NIV)

- 1 “Shout it aloud, do not hold back.
Raise your voice like a trumpet.
Declare to my people their rebellion
and to the descendants of Jacob their sins.
- 2 For day after day they seek me out;
they seem eager to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that does what is right
and has not forsaken the commands of its God.
They ask me for just decisions
and seem eager for God to come near them.
- 3 ‘Why have we fasted,’ they say,
‘and you have not seen it?
Why have we humbled ourselves,
and you have not noticed?’
“Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please
and exploit all your workers.
- 4 Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife,
and in striking each other with wicked fists.
You cannot fast as you do today
and expect your voice to be heard on high.
- 5 Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,
only a day for people to humble themselves?
Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed
and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Is that what you call a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?
- 6 “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?
- 7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?
- 8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness[a] will go before you,
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.
- 9 Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.
“If you do away with the yoke of oppression,
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,
and
- 10 and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your night will become like the noonday.

- 11 The Lord will guide you always;
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land
and will strengthen your frame.
You will be like a well-watered garden,
like a spring whose waters never fail.
- 12 Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins
and will raise up the age-old foundations;
you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

ECCLESIASTES 10: 13-17 (NIV)

- 13 At the beginning their words are folly;
at the end they are wicked madness—
- 14 and fools multiply words.
No one knows what is coming—
who can tell someone else what will happen after them?
- 15 The toil of fools wearies them;
they do not know the way to town.
- 16 Woe to the land whose king was a servant[a]
and whose princes feast in the morning.
- 17 Blessed is the land whose king is of noble birth
and whose princes eat at a proper time—
for strength and not for drunkenness.

THE BOOK OF JOB

The Book of Job presents an intriguing challenge for liberation theologians due to its intricate nature. Unlike the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible that offer a prophetic word on the human response to poverty, the Book of Job adds a contemplative element that encourages readers to ask tough questions about God and theodicy. Job 42:1-8 provides an example of this.

In his book, “On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent,” Gustavo Gutiérrez explains that the significance of the Book of Job for liberation theologians goes beyond its depiction of God’s rescue of the poor or explanation of poverty. While it does demonstrate God’s preference for the poor, the Book of Job is particularly crucial for instructing Christians on how to speak of God amidst suffering.

Allison Gosset
Speaking to God in Suffering

MARK 5: 1–20 (NIV)

1 They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes.

2 When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him.

3 This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain.

4 For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him.

5 Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

6 When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him.

7 He shouted at the top of his voice, “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God’s name don’t torture me!”

8 For Jesus had said to him, “Come out of this man, you impure spirit!”

9 Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” “My name is Legion,” he replied, “for we are many.” **10** And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.

11 A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside.

12 The demons begged Jesus, “Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them.”

13 He gave them permission, and the impure spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

14 Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened.

15 When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid.

16 Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man—and told about the pigs as well.

17 Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

18 As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him.

19 Jesus did not let him, but said, “Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.”

20 So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.

RETURN & RESTORE

SONGS & SERMONS

SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE A MOTHERLESS CHILD

blind Boys of Alabama

I SHALL NOT WALK ALONE

Blind Boys of Alabama

FREE

Goodie Mob

HOW MUCH A DOLLAR COST

Kendrick Lamar

HEALING

Richard Smallwood

BETTER

Hezekiah Walker

NEVER ALONE

Tori Kelly feat. Kirk Franklin

WORTH FIGHTING FOR

Brian Courtney-Wilson

THE BEST IN ME

Marvin Sapp

SOMETHING HAPPENS (JESUS)

Bishop Paul S. Morton

CRAZY STREETS

Verbal Kwest



I CAN GO TO GOD IN PRAYER

Albertina Walker

RELEASE

The Church Choir feat. Maranda Curtis & John P. Kee

I MADE IT OUT

John P. Kee feat. Zacardi Cortez

HE TURNED IT

Tye Tribbett

THE JERICO ROAD



Rev. Raquel Lettsome (video)

COMPREHENSIVE SALVATION



Rev. JoDavid Sales



Find these songs and more on your streaming platform above or by
visiting www.sandsj.org/playlist

ALTAR CALL

Normally during altar call, we ask folks to come up, admit their sin, and give their lives to Jesus Christ. We invite them to join the church. Or we ask if they need special prayer. But today, we are being called on to do things differently.

Today, we offer you a God who offers us comprehensive salvation. Today, we offer a God who says to us, "I'm here for you. Not just because you are a sinner, but because you are sinned-against. Because you are sick. Because you are depressed. Because you are oppressed. Because you live in an environment that harms you. I am a God who sees you where you are."

No longer shall we let this altar be an altar for sinners alone. There are days when we come to this altar, and we have done things to God, people, and ourselves that we wish we never did. There are other days we come to this altar and people have done things to us and we are burdened with trauma and grief. Still, there are other days we find ourselves at this altar, struggling with illness in our body, mind, and cells. Still other days, we cry out from the injustice that we see in this world that continuously falls upon the descendants of slaves and our indigenous brothers and sisters. We invite all of you—for these reasons and more—to this altar.

To those who use, sell, or possess drugs or have used, sold, or possessed drugs—we understand that these matters are complicated. Still, come to this altar. You may have suffered harm because of drugs or have harmed someone because of drugs. And we also recognize that we live in a world that too often criminalizes and punishes Black and brown folks unfairly and harsher than similar incidents involving our white brothers and sisters. And so because of how Black folks are criminalized, we face unjust imprisonment and continue to suffer the devastating effects of slavery: plunder, familial fragmentation, and poverty to name a few. We invite all of us—for these reasons and more—to this altar. God sees you.

PRAYER

Lord, we pray for those who are impacted by drugs, addiction, criminalization, and imprisonment. God, these are complicated issues. And we confess, our language surrounding these issues have often been ungracious, imprecise, and, at times, harmful. We admit that folks sell, use, and possess drugs for multiple reasons. And instead of understanding the reasons, we too often use sin and sinner language to label them, which allows us to turn a blind eye to the deeper roots of the issue. You have called us to seek justice, to do mercy, and to walk humbly with you. But, Lord, there are times we find ourselves aligned with systems and institutions that have been unjust, unmerciful, and everything but humble. We admit that sometimes, we simply do not know how to respond to the oppression, crime, and misery we see in our communities. We know something must be done, that certain crimes need to be deterred, that we do not want to live in fear or scarcity, but the options the status quo offers us never seem to lead to restoration and community. In a world where our communities have been decimated from within and without—we ask you, O God, create in us a clean heart; renew a right spirit within us; and let our minds not conform to the patterns of this world; a world that too often reaches for retribution before restoration. We pray that you might deliver those in the throes of drug abuse. Please continue to raise the profile and work with those who seek to break the chains of drug abuse and addiction. But deliver us too, Lord. Deliver us from perspectives and theologies that are unhelpful—perspectives and theologies that have not seen this issue as a public health emergency, but only through the lens of public safety. Deliver us from this socioeconomic arrangement that continues to grind down the poor, Black, indigenous, and brown folk. Give us a spirit of resistance, liberation, and imagination that seeks to collaborate with you in the work of salvation. Grant us your wisdom. Grant us your peace. Help us, God, to do your will. We pray for those who, amidst their harms, in the midst of injustice, in the midst of lack of resources, and in the midst of communal and familial fragmentation find themselves with few options. We seek holistic, comprehensive salvation that punishment alone will not and cannot accomplish. But we know and believe that you can do an abundant work within us that is able to accomplish above and beyond all we could ever ask or imagine. Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on us this day! Amen.

BIBLE STUDY PROMPTS

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

(Luke 10:25-37)

What question prompts this parable? Do you feel that it is significant that neither the robbers nor the man is identified by ethnicity or religion, but the Samaritan, Levite, and priest are? What does “mercy” look like from the perspective of the Samaritan? How does this parable increase our understandings of the “sinned-against,” neighbors, and mercy? How might the Jericho Road complicate our approaches to sin, criminality, the sinned-against, and restoration? Jesus told the lawyer to “go and do likewise.” What does “go and do likewise” mean for us today?

THE BOOK OF JOB

Moving beyond Retributive Theologies

Imagine a Bible study that takes these three questions seriously:

1. Does Job fear God for nothing? That is, are we able to enter into a relationship with God in a manner that is not retributive? The Satan’s claim is that Job believes in God because he expects a reward for doing so and punishment if he does not. In other words, the Satan’s claim is that religion itself, even for the most blameless, is merely retributive. The Accusers fundamental assertion is that human beings don’t believe in God, we (ultimately) believe in retribution. It will be hard to create restorative models of justice if this belief is not interrogated within our theological and religious imagination.
2. How do we speak about God correctly in situations involving great suffering and death? Job’s friends are rebuked by God because they have not done so.
3. The Book of Job assails the sin-punishment-suffering retributive paradigm that is found in many parts of the Bible—both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures—and throughout our society. Are there ways to think about suffering and death that include sin, but are not reduced to sin and punishment?

IGNORING THE POOR MAN’S WISDOM

Ecclesiastes 10:13-17

Qoheleth, the “Teacher,” in Ecclesiastes allows for the reality of absurdity and meaninglessness to (rightfully) become a part of our theological and religious sensibilities. This text explores the importance and emptiness of wisdom. In our text, Qoheleth recounts a tale of a poor, wise man who had an idea to save a city against a great adversary, but no one remembered or thought of that wise man because he was poor. This text reminds us that the wisdom and knowledge of the oppressed and marginalized is often despised and disregarded even if it is helpful. In what ways have we not listened to the cries, insights, and lifeways of the oppressed and how has the label of criminality allowed us to continue to ignore their wisdom? Do they have ways that can “save our city” that we will not heed, simply because they are socioeconomically disadvantaged?

FASTING FROM ALL THAT HARMS

Isaiah 58:1-12

The prophet calls his community in Ancient Israel into a communal fast. This fast will not consist of going without food or by the abjection found in sackcloth; rather, it is to be reminded of those who go without food every day and are abject every day—in other words, the socially sinned-against and marginalized. The community is called to fast. What would it look like to put communal fasting in conversation with drug abuse, our criminal justice system, and our political economy. Could our society, state, church have a call to action where we fast from all things that disfigure our humanity and our fractures our community? Is this what it means to repair the breach today—fasting from racist and classist biases in our criminal justice system; fasting from socioeconomic policies that destroy and plunder communities; fasting from drug abuse that has harmed individuals and communities; fasting from retributive practices that punish but do not restore? What would such a prophetic action look like today?

EXORCISM: SYMBOLIC, SPIRITUAL, AND POLITICAL LIBERATION

Luke 10:25-37

For the purposes of our Bible Study, let us focus on three questions:

1. Despite the possibility of our misunderstanding of ancient worldviews, the ancients saw something **mundane** in demonic possession that we might overlook today: by locating the suffering and death in demons, ancient communities were able to hold that some kinds of suffering and death were caused by reasons beyond human sin and divine punishment. In other words, Jesus did not see this man as a sinner or as punished by God, but he did take action to restore him. What actions does Jesus take that lead to the demoniac's restoration?

2. Mark approaches this story from multiple levels, as "legion" only had one meaning in his time: a division of troops for the Roman Empire. The demoniac, who lives in a place of death, is therefore *occupied* by symbolic, spiritual, and imperial forces of wickedness and domination—*just like the town of Gerasa*. What happens to people when they are occupied by forces of domination that seek to exploit then kill them? Is this not another way of looking at the criminalization of Black bodies and Black communities? The status quo places 1000 criminalities on Black folk who cry out day and night. And under such a burden, some might engage in various harms, but the violence is not due to inherent criminality. Ultimately, the harm occurs because of a demonic imperial power's unrelenting occupation of a land.

3. What do we make of the fact that after seeing that Jesus can provide a comprehensive healing/liberation that the Gerasene community asks Jesus to leave? How might this relate to the unwillingness of various community partners to engage in comprehensive strategies for restoration?



BOOKS

Each Reading/Book Selection undergirds the work of Decriminalization and restorative justice by approaching human suffering and death with theological perspectives that do not start or end with sin and retributive paradigms. Rather, each reading seeks to think about God and salvation beyond those paradigms so that the oppressed, marginalized, and forgotten might have a voice in theological reflection.

THE WOUNDED HEART OF GOD

By: Andrew Sung Park

The Wounded Heart of God by Andrew Sung Park, although dated, introduces the Korean concept of “han,” and explores the reality of the sinned-against and how the traditional Christian doctrine of sin (and salvation) does not fully account for the multiple ways in which human beings suffer, nor does the doctrine offer much help to the plight of those who find themselves wounded by sin and suffering. Many Eurocentric traditions lack a cultural understanding of that “woundedness,” but Park believes, the concept of han has a rich and complex cultural history that allows Christian theology to be more self-aware and offer better responses to the web of misery and suffering in the world. Theologically, this book is foundational for any theologian, pastor, or concerned lay member who takes seriously the reality of the sinned-against.

THE OTHER SIDE OF SIN

By: Andrew Sung Park

The Other Side of Sin: Woundedness from the Perspective of the Sinned-Against is an edited volume by Andrew Sung Park and Susan Nelson that picks up where *The Wounded Heart of God* left off. However, instead of Park’s voice and perspective alone, there are multiple voices from biblical studies to ethics to pastoral counseling to theology.

JESUS AND THE DISINHERITED

By: Howard Thurman

Jesus and the Disinherited by Howard Thurman should be required reading for anyone involved in thinking about the intersection of Christianity, spirituality, the dispossession caused by White Supremacy, and the various attempts of Black folk to carve out spaces of hope, joy, lament, and resistance.

ON JOB

By: Gustavo Gutiérrez

On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent is a great companion to a Bible Study on the book of Job. This is written by the “father” of Latin American Liberation Theology, Gustavo Gutierrez. The book thoroughly dissects Job’s critique of theologies of retribution and how these theologies do not serve the interests of the poor and oppressed.

STRENGTH TO LOVE

By: Martin Luther King Jr.

“On Being a Good Neighbor” in *Strength to Love* by Martin Luther King, Jr. explores the different types of altruism the Good Samaritan embodied. It would be a great companion or secondary study to the Good Samaritan parable. Possible avenues of discussion: have readers give current examples of the various altruisms explored by King and contemporary obstacles for putting that kind of altruism into action.

For more than 50 years, the United States government has launched a racist and ineffective War on Drugs which has been nothing more than a war on Black communities. Salvation and Social Justice advocates for the decriminalization of personal use drugs to stop the disproportionate over-policing and incarceration of our communities. But to be clear, drug decriminalization is NOT drug legalization. Here's the difference...

WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT

DE CRIM INALI ZATI ON

DRUG DECRIMINALIZATION

is the act of removing criminal sanctions against certain activities such as having in possession personal use drugs or paraphernalia. While the substance itself may still be prohibited, the consequences for possession are no longer treated as criminal. The production and sale of drugs are still illegal.

DRUG LEGALIZATION

is the act of permitting by law the use of substances and is often met with some sort of regulations. It means that the law would permit individuals to freely acquire and possess drugs in the state of New Jersey. **We are NOT advocating for this!**

While Black people make up

15%

of New Jersey's population, we represent

43%

of the arrests for drug violations even though there is no evidence that Black people use drugs at a higher rate than white people.

SO WHAT WOULD DRUG DECRIMINALIZATION LOOK LIKE IN NEW JERSEY?

It would no longer be a crime to...

...Be in simple possession of a controlled substance

...Be under the influence of or consuming a controlled substance

It would still be a crime to...

...Manufacture and/or sell drugs

...Use, distribute, sell or possess drugs on school property and/or in the presence of minors

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Overdose Awareness Day Reinforces Why NJ Must Decriminalize All Drugs - Ami Kachalia, Campaign Strategist, Policy Department, ACLU New Jersey

<https://www.aclu-nj.org/en/news/overdose-awareness-day-reinforces-why-nj-must-decriminalize-all-drugs>

Protecting Our Communities: All Neighborhoods Need Health-Centered Approaches to Be Safe And Just

https://drugpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/2023.09.13_Communities_Toolkit_FINAL.pdf

Drug Policy in Portugal: The Benefits of Decriminalizing Drug Use

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A Quiet Revolution: Drug Decriminalisation Across the Globe

<https://www.release.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf/publications/A%20Quiet%20Revolution%20-%20Decriminalisation%20Across%20the%20Globe.pdf>

Bethany Baptist Church and the Drug Policy Alliance Host New Directions Conference, March 19th in Newark, NJ

<https://drugpolicy.org/news/bethany-baptist-church-and-drug-policy-alliance-host-new-directions-conference-march-19/>

Drug Policy Alliance Launches Marijuana Legalization campaign in New Jersey Focused Racial and Social Justice

<https://drugpolicy.org/news/drug-policy-alliance-launches-marijuana-legalization-campaign-new-jersey-focused-racial/>

Support Fair and Equitable Marijuana Legalization in New Jersey

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VqKDBubeo7M>

Woodbury church forum to call for end of war on drugs - Kim Mulford, Courier-Post

<https://www.courierpostonline.com/story/news/local/2018/03/06/woodbury-church-forum-call-end-war-drugs-marijuana-reform/399588002/>

Racial Justice Drives Fight for, and Against, Legal Pot in New Jersey

<https://www.wnyc.org/story/racial-justice-drives-fight-and-against-legal-pot-new-jersey/>

Mount Zion Baptist Church of Pleasantville, Atlantic City and Mainland-Pleasantville NAACP branches, the Atlantic County Coalition for a Safe Community and the Drug Policy Alliance Host Forum on Marijuana Legalization and Racial Justice

<https://www.insidernj.com/press-release/mount-zion-baptist-church-pleasantville-atlantic-city-mainland-pleasantville-naacp-branches-atlantic-county-coalition-safe-community-drug-policy-alliance-host-forum-mari/>

Monday June 18th: Forum on Racial Justice and Marijuana Legalization at First Bethel AME Church in Paterson

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Rev. Charles Boyer, Faith Leaders Discuss Cannabis Vote In Middle of COVID-19

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Just NJ Cannabis Legislation Demanded By. rev. Charles Boyer

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GRAPHIC DESIGNED BY
KRISTAL MENGUC
THE VARSITY



LIBERATION TOOLKIT

Developing Connectional vision for **youth** liberation...

Brothers and Sisters,

As part of our commitment to the church's legacy and in the spirit of radical love and liberation for our children, the AME Connectional Task Force on Criminal Justice is excited to launch our Return & Restore Pulpit Toolkit.

This toolkit will combine resources to implement a priestly and prophetic agenda for your congregation and for your community. The priestly agenda will provide information, action steps, strategies, and more to guide your social justice work on a local level. The prophetic agenda will provide the same to guide your church's social justice work on a broader policy level.

WE NEED YOUR HELP TO MAKE THIS HAPPEN!

Scan the QR code or follow the link to get involved:

www.sandsj.org/ameyouth



Help us create a Connectional toolkit by joining one of these working groups when you **sign up**:

- **Cast the Vision** – Brainstorm church responses to Prevention, Intervention, and Restoration
- **Policy** – Identify policies, advocates, and lawmakers in your District/State
- **Theological Reflections** – Explanations and liturgical resources
- **Literary Resources** – Create a suggested faith-based reading list for Prevention, Intervention, and Restoration
- **Legal Database** – All AME individuals within legal, criminal justice, and corrections fields
- **Communications** – Marketing, recruitment, graphic design, and social media



MEET THE TEAM

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