

March 28, 2021  
*via electronic mail*

Governor Tate Reeves  
Lt. Governor Delbert Hosemann  
Speaker Philip Gunn  
Honorable Members of the Mississippi House  
Honorable Members of the Mississippi Senate

**Re: Faith and Justice**

We are writing to urge action this session to enact lasting reforms to our justice system, including both meaningful parole and habitual reform.

It's no secret that Mississippi prisons have been in crisis. The last two years marked a record number of deaths inside state prison facilities, where dozens of people lost their lives. With the second highest rate of incarceration in the country, the state faces significant challenges in providing a constructive and safe environment for those in custody.

In Paul's letter to the Hebrews, he calls on them to "*Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.*" Mississippi has a constitutional obligation to provide a safe, humane environment in state prisons, but this obligation is also a Biblical one as we are called to treat all people as creatures in the image of God.

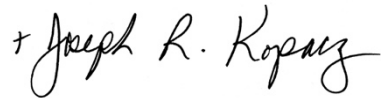
We are simultaneously mindful of the fact that the state has a legitimate interest and responsibility to protect the public from harmful criminal conduct. We believe that these callings are not opposite of one another. It is possible to protect the public and simultaneously implement smart reforms that responsibly reduce the prison population, allowing valuable state resources to be focused on the most viable threats, making our prisons and communities safer.

The legislature is currently considering several bills that would reduce the prison population as well as the crime rate. We urge you to adopt reforms in SB 2795/HB 525 that would expand parole eligibility to bring Mississippi's parole laws in-line with states like Texas. The possibility of parole not only recognizes that people are capable of change, but creates an actual incentive to change and brings hope to the incarcerated. Additionally, HB 796 makes changes to the state's habitual laws, helping to ensure that disproportionate punishments, up to life in prison, are not imposed for minor offenses like drug possession.

We believe these reforms constitute an important step in the right direction. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus calls us to love and care for our neighbors, including those who are in prison, "*Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.*"

We recognize that as policymakers, you face difficult decisions daily about how to enact policies that improve the lives of Mississippians. We ask you to not forget “the least of these” as you go about this work.

Sincerely,




Bishop Joseph R. Kopacz,  
Catholic Diocese of Jackson



Marilyn Tinnin.  
Founder, Mississippi Christian Living



Heather Rice-Minus  
Senior Vice-President,  
Advocacy and Church Mobilization,  
Prison Fellowship



Ron Matis  
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Gene Henderson, Th.D  
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MS Offender Reentry Experience



Reverend C.J. Rhodes, Th.D,  
President, Clergy for Prison Reform