Victorian Heads of Churches

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A safer Victoria: *An open Letter to Victorian Parliamentarians and election candidates*

We are writing to urge a greater effort on the part of all our politicians and community leaders to respond to the community demand for a safer Victoria.

We recognise the importance of the rule of law: this includes responding to crimes against the person and their possessions. However, increased emphasis on imprisonment as a punishment, and on longer sentences, are not the best or most effective ways to reduce crime.

Even though repeat offending rates have been falling in Victoria, there are still significant problems in our justice system:

- There has been a 49% increase in Victorian prison beds in the past ten years
- 50% of prisoners return to jail after being released
- Only 6% of those imprisoned in Victoria have completed secondary schooling
- Almost 50% of offenders in custody have some history of mental illness, and just over 25% of newly remanded prisoners have a diagnosed mental illness
- Around 70% of all prisoners admit to having recently used an illegal drug, and around 55% have drug and alcohol issues associated with their offence

Our prison chaplains tell us that prison makes people worse by fragmenting the offender's family and community relationships and increasing exposure to criminal influence which makes them more likely to offend on release. The abolition of suspended sentences could make this situation worse.

Victoria is budgeting to spend an extra $126 million over four years on an additional 244 prison beds. Taxpayers are spending an average of $113,000 per year to keep each prisoner locked away.

There are better ways to make our community safer.

A safe community starts with adequate support for families, child protection, early learning programs, affordable housing, mental health services, family violence programs, decent work opportunities and drug and alcohol counselling.

Effective school retention programs have a key role to play in enabling young people to build lives that do not include crime. And when young people do offend, they need special treatment to reflect their vulnerability and to maximise the chances of their rehabilitation.

An investment in early intervention and improved mental health services will significantly reduce the number of offenders. Addressing these issues through intensive support breaks the cycle of exclusion and criminal behaviour.

People who feel part of their community are less likely to commit crime, so it is important that when people leave prison they are equipped to fully re-join the

community. Their skills, health and links with their family and community will be crucial. Without housing and employment, community inclusion is unlikely.

Unfortunately there will always be a place in our society for some prisons to keep the community safe. But to make a lasting impact on community safety we must prevent crime in the first place through community strengthening and through individual and family support, and we must ensure that offenders are equipped and assisted to fully re-join our community. It's time we saw the debate shift to reducing the number of prisoners in Victoria rather than increasing them.

Yours sincerely

+ Philip Freier
Anglican Archbishop of Melbourne

+ Andrew W. Curnow
Anglican Bishop of Bendigo

+ John McIntyre
Anglican Bishop of Gippsland

+ John Parkes
Anglican Bishop of Wangaratta.

+ Denis J Hart
Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne

+ Peter J Connors
Catholic Bishop of Ballarat

+ Christopher Prowse
Catholic Bishop of Sale

+ Joseph Grech
Catholic Bishop of Sandhurst

Paul Cameron
Executive Officer
Churches of Christ in Victoria and Tasmania

Graeme Rigley (Major)
Divisional Commander
Melbourne Central Division
The Salvation Army

Isabel Thomas Dobson
Moderator
Synod of Victoria and Tasmania
Uniting Church in Australia

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