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# Marin Voice: Clean Slate program addresses inequity, injustice on individual, systemic level

By [REV. FLOYD THOMPKINS](#) |

February 14, 2022 at 12:26 p.m.

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I have the great joy of serving as pastor for St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Marin City.

This is a church with a strong and long tradition of social justice and caring for the community. The congregation has been involved in housing issues and the civil rights movement. It was instrumental in creating the National Presbyterian Church's defense fund for famed activist Angela Davis and it is involved in the Black Lives Matter movement now.

We literally wear our tradition with intention and pride on our current congregational T-shirts, which have images of the Black Lives Matter movement. As a community, we have doggedly persevered in rising to meet the recurring challenges of institutional change and individual reclamation.

On Feb. 17, the church, in collaboration with the Marin County Public Defender's office, the Marin County District Attorney's Office and the Marin County Probation Department, is launching Clean Slate, a program and an opportunity to address inequity and injustice on an individual and systemic level.

The United States penal system has systematically and continuously hurt people who were innocent. Crimes have real victims and so too does our justice and legal system. The war on drugs, three-strike legislation and many of the current immigration laws have been unequally enforced by policy and in practice.

On death row, there are people who have been erroneously sentenced. We know that mistakes continue to be made – sometimes intentionally. However, the worst and most crippling of these mistakes are not mistakes at all. They are mistakes of policy based in fear and in opposition to the facts. This results in people with records that can often be undeserved harsh and incredibly hard to correct.

Laws and policies are not self-correcting; they are reactive to the hard work of advocates, like the St. Andrew Presbyterian community, striving and straining towards peace and justice. California officials have addressed some of the more glaring attributions of crippling charges to the records of people that were either overcharged or have served their time and have had to bear the stigma of crimes for which they have served their time. Criminal records can be economically crippling and consequently add to the rate of recidivism.

It is therefore a matter of great joy to see the Public Defender's Office, the DA's Office, the Probation Department and Marin Health and Human Services Department working together to address the lingering repercussions of bad policy, unjust applications of the law, or ignorance about legal options to expunge records. These agencies and entities, which are indeed deserving of great scrutiny and criticism, should be praised for proactively correcting or addressing past and present harms.

The justice system should not be “institutionalized meanness.” In a season of oppositional politics, it is refreshing to see people of differing political persuasions coming together and agreeing that people ought to be treated fairly and that justice is about accountability and restoration, not about uninterrupted demonization or a continuous label of criminality on a person’s life.

So on Feb. 17, if you pass by the parking lot of church, look in on the people working for justice with grace. This is the hope that is borne in the marches and protests – that real change happens, that institutions address past harms and that people who were pushed into the margins are invited back to the middle.

This is the hope of the gospel of my faith and I believe the universal hope of all people who would recognize and celebrate human decency and kindness.

*The Rev. Floyd Thompkins, of Novato, is pastor of Saint Andrew Presbyterian Church in Marin City and CEO of the Justice and Peace Foundation.*

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