

Talking about incarceration

By [Amy Frykholm](#)

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In [a recent interview](#) with the *Century*, Michelle Alexander, the civil rights lawyer and author of *The New Jim Crow*, wonders about the stigma in many churches attached to people who have been recently released from prisons. “The deep irony,” she says, “is that the very folks who ought to be the most sensitive to the demonization of the ‘despised,’ the prisoners, have been complicit and silent.”

But the kinds of conversations that Alexander’s book seems to demand are very difficult to have--in churches and outside them. They require looking many deeply rooted national and communal demons in the face. The church can be fragile territory for that.

One group in Washington, D.C. has taken this challenge on. A group of ex-offenders, prison guards, corrections officers, civil rights advocates and students read Alexander’s book together in a class called “Mass Incarceration and the Gospel’s Call to Freedom.”

Yolande Ford, a UCC minister among those who convened the group, tells me that the work was difficult, but the members had discussed the difficulty upfront:

Our assumption was that the only way that this would be beneficial is if we were able to be as open and frank and accepting as possible. We committed to do a lot of listening to each other... We would present from our own experience, not in generalities. We would speak from the gut... We would not pull punches.

Another member of the group, Becca Stelle, recalls that she was grateful for the church-related context in which the reading took place: the system of mass incarceration “was painful for all of us to reckon with as truth. It was so helpful for us to [remember] that we belong to each other in another way.” She says that the group was able to turn to that memory in times of resentment and difficulty.

The group did not come to any conclusions about what should be done as a result of their reading. Some favored traditional means of demonstrations and protests. Others had strong bouts of cynicism. All agreed that the conversation must continue.