

**Statements from MICAH Press Conference
May 21, 2020**

**OPENING: Rev. Dr. Rosalyn R. Nichols, MICAH Founder & Pastor-
Freedom's Chapel Christian Church**

"I am here this morning standing with our 63 MICAH partners. We are not a monolithic organization, we come from a diverse cross section of citizens, individuals, and organizations with good conscience, good faith, good practice and good labor. And together we have made the good commitment to care for and speak up on behalf of our fellow human beings, regardless of race, creed, gender identification, age, ability, socioeconomic experiences or location in life. We are particularly committed and concerned for those whose current location in life has rendered them unheard and at great risk.

We do this in good faith by faith and goodwill, practicing the words of the prophet who said, *We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.*

If this season in our nation's story teaches us nothing else, it is the call for us to be mindful that to care for our neighbor as we care for ourselves is a demonstration of our humanity.

And when I am concerned about who my neighbor maybe; when I am concerned if they are worthy of my help, my faith tradition, rooted in the faith tradition of Judaism, supported by the faith of my Muslim cousins, and not rejected by the practices of my Hindu and Buddhist friends, calls for me to see my neighbor, who is vulnerable and at risk, while others, anxiously, nervously, busily turn and walk away. I am called to see and reach out to the ones, by virtue of their location in life are at risk and without a doubt in harm's way.

It is with this in mind that we are here to speak on behalf of both those individuals and their families who work at the Shelby County Division of Corrections, and those individuals who, through the judicial process, are incarcerated and housed in the facility, under the leadership of Dir. Anthony Alexander.

We are here today speaking for those whose voices and concerns regarding covid-19 testing have not been heard. We are here to reiterate our continued ask to our County Mayor, the Honorable Lee Harris, Director of the Shelby County Health Department, Dr. Alisa Haushalter, and SCDC Dir. Anthony Alexander, for the immediate covid-19 testing of both the employees and those individuals who are incarcerated and held at the Shelby County Division of Corrections, which is separate from those housed at 201 Poplar.

Those housed at the SCDC and their families are concerned for their health and welfare. We, as members of MICAH and citizens of Memphis and Shelby County are equally concerned and

have asked and called for testing repeatedly. To not test is inhumane, unjust; irresponsible and ultimately a matter of public safety for those workers who enter and exit daily returning to their families and loved ones, and for those who are held in the facility and their families concerned as well.

This is not a question of the judicial process. We understand these individuals housed have broken the law. They have been found guilty and many are awaiting sentencing. That process has already taken place. This is a matter, therefore of the health and welfare for all of us. They have already been judged and found guilty. This is not about judgement; this is about humanity. How we treat one another. And the judgement we will receive will be based on how we treat those who are at risk. Their housing, not their crime, places them at risk and we are responsible for attending to that risk. Not for them only, but for their families, their communities and for us all. We are to provide a refuge, not a further condemnation and punishment.

This morning during my quiet time, my devotional offered this for consideration:
Do not judge or you too will be judged. For the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. The question was *'Are there those God is calling you to stop judging? What might it look like to bless and extend mercy to them?'*

My answer was, *'Yes, and mercy comes in the form of testing. Blessings come in caring for our neighbors, our fellow human beings regardless of the cause or their location in life.'*

And my prayer for us:

Forgive us for having so many opinions about so many people and judging them. Wipe the slate of our hearts clean and give us grace to offer what is needed at this time. In the name of all that is good and holy. Amen."

OVERVIEW OF SHELBY COUNTY'S DETENTION FACILITIES:

Meggan Kiel, MICAHA Organizer

"As MICAHA has ventured into advocacy of the incarcerated individuals in Shelby County, we have learned that there is a lot of confusion about the detention facilities in our community and who oversees them. As we, ourselves, have learned the correct names of facilities and the respective responsible parties, we want to make sure that all in the community are also aware:

There are 4 detention facilities under the purview of Shelby County.

Shelby County Jail (often referred to as 201 Poplar), Jail East Women's Facility, and the Juvenile Detention Center are under the Shelby County Sheriff's Office, Sheriff Floyd Bonner.

The Shelby County Division of Corrections (sometimes referred to as the "Penal Farm") is under the Direction of Anthony Alexander who was appointed to the position by Mayor Lee Harris."

SAFEGUARDING OF THE INCARCERATED POPULATION:

Janiece J. Lee, MICAH Vice President & Lay Leader- Hope Church

“MICAH has been focused on being sure that the marginalized and at-risk among us are being tested and treated fairly and equitably during the COVID-19 pandemic. We began asking questions and outlining our position at the end of March, calling on local public officials to work on the deconcentration and decarceration of our local detention and correctional facilities and for safeguarding of those who remain in the care and custody of Shelby County. Since late March, MICAH has put the full weight of its coalition behind the push for fair and equitable treatment of the incarcerated population in our community.

We called on District Attorney Weirich, Chief Defender Aluko, Sheriff Bonner and Mayor Harris to reduce the population at the local detention centers either directly or by putting pressure on local judges and law enforcement groups to consider releasing specific categories of individuals, including the medically compromised or vulnerable. We have asked the Sheriff, Mayor Harris and Director Alexander of the Shelby County Division of Corrections to provide information and remain transparent as to their processes and procedures used in safeguarding the populations in their care.

Since the drafting of MICAH’s position statement at the end of March and our first press conference on April 7th, we have reached out to these same officials multiple times. We received written responses from Weirich and Bonner and met with Chief Public Defender Phyllis Aluko, Sheriff Floyd Bonner, Mayor Lee Harris and his staff on multiple occasions, Dr. Haushalter and Shelby County Division of Corrections Director Anthony Alexander. We requested a meeting with General Weirich, but did not receive any response.

During April, Sheriff Bonner began releasing weekly updates providing the number of tests given, the results of those tests and updates to their policies and procedures. We were made aware of surge testing being done by the Shelby County Health Department with 266 tests being conducted on one day for those being held at 201 Poplar. 137 of those tested that day, on or around April 29th, were positive for COVID-19.

We then began asking for the same transparency for those being held at SCDC but, though we were told that there were 9 employees who tested positive from SCDC and 0 incarcerated who tested positive, we did not know how many people at SCDC had been tested. MICAH, meanwhile, was hearing from family and loved ones of those housed at SCDC, a facility that houses men and women in 40-person open dormitories, that there were sick people at the facility and that the fear and anxiety there among the population was very high.

Given the significant numbers of COVID-19 positive incarcerated people across the nation, and specifically within the state of Tennessee, MICAH knew that this was an issue of public safety

for both those being housed and those who are employed at the SCDC and their families. MICAH continued its push for testing.

MICAH is hesitant to say that we are excited – as the measure is long overdue and necessary – but we are relieved to announce that at a meeting with MICAH leadership yesterday, Mayor Harris committed to accelerating the surge testing done at the SCDC, having it completed by May 29th. We believe that this is an urgent and critical need.

Those of you who know me know that I often lean on Bryan Stevenson of the Equal Justice Initiative. Here is no different. Mr. Stevenson has said, “All of our survival is tied to the survival of everyone.” I add, such is our humanity – all of our humanity is tied to the humanity we project onto everyone, including the incarcerated among us.

MICAH is dedicated to the care and dignity of all souls.”

DECARCERATION/DECONCENTRATION OF DETENTION FACILITIES:

Stephen McIntosh, MICAH Delegate & Elder- Idlewild Presbyterian Church

“Shifting from testing, but continuing with the theme of providing humane, equitable and safe treatment of those who are incarcerated in Shelby County, I want to address the topic of actions and transparency related to decarceration and deconcentration. In today’s context, this refers to the release and separation of individuals from one another within our local jails and prisons in order to reduce the health risks to those who are incarcerated, to the prison staff and to our community. These practices are currently being implemented on a widescale basis across our nation in an effort to minimize the impact of COVID-19.

After requesting information in April on these topics with the District Attorney, there remained several unanswered questions and requests which were subsequently recomunicated in writing to Ms. Weirich via email on May 1st. To date, there has been no response to this correspondence.

Specifically, MICAH has requested action and transparency in 2 areas related to individuals who are detained at 201 Poplar, Jail East, the Juvenile Detention Center and the Shelby County Division of Corrections.

First, MICAH has asked for action in the form of the release of individuals who are in 2 categories:

- 1. Those being housed at the Shelby County Division of Corrections for a nonviolent offense and with fewer than 90 days left on their sentence...and...**
- 2. Those who are being held at any of the county’s detention/correctional facilities for nonviolent parole or probation technical violations who can become part of the supervisory responsibility of the Office of Probation and Parole.**

These requests for release are in addition to the ones that were simply being held because they could not afford their cash bail as well as those who are deemed to be “medically vulnerable” due to illness, medical condition, or age. We received assurances via a written response from District Attorney Weirich on April 15th that these individuals had received a priority focus relative to release.

Secondly, MICAH has requested transparency by providing specific demographic, conviction type and sentencing length breakdowns by facility of those individuals who are currently detained, as well as those who have either been released, or have been recommended for release by the DA’s office since the March 26th Supreme Court mandate to reduce jail populations. We have also sought to understand the criteria that are being applied to determine who is eligible for release, as well as what criteria would continue to be applied as the city and county begin to reopen.

There has been no response to these requests.

Lastly, arrests have continued since the May 1st correspondence, and in the absence of communication from the DA’s office on what protocol or criteria is being used to determine whether or not to add to the incarcerated population, **MICAH is asking for additional information about those individuals who have been detained since the beginning of the month including specifically, how many were taken into custody for misdemeanor or nonviolent offenses, how many were females or juveniles, the race of the detainees, and how many were taken into custody on a technical nonviolent probation or parole violation?**

We are requesting that this information be shared with MICAH and be available to the public by next Wednesday, May 27th.

Implementing the requested actions for release and providing transparency into the incarcerated population, along with the detainment criteria, are all essential steps in ensuring that humanity is maintained, equity is established, and safety is afforded to those who are incarcerated, to the corrections staff, and to the rest of our community. As a citizen, I believe that these requests are reasonable and appropriate in light of the risks to all parties and am urging the District Attorney to be responsive.”

MORAL IMPERATIVE: Ernie Hilliard- MICAH Re-Entry Chair & Elder- Hope Church

“I am Ernie Hilliard, an elder at Hope Church. I head our prison ministry and am personally involved with incarcerated men and women at Shelby County Division of Corrections. So my

message will dovetail with where we started with Rev. Roz...being about humanity. The question is about where has our humanity gone? What have we become as a society? How we look at our brothers and sisters...our mothers and dads...our families our neighbors people who we live us... we connect with every day... who we interact with?

Do we expect them to get the same treatment we expect for ourselves? Should they be exposed to violent and inhospitable conditions? Should they be viewed as less than human...and treated unfairly? Since I mentor a lot of individuals, I see firsthand and experience what they experience. I can't walk in their shoes but I can walk alongside them...and hear their stories, their struggles, understand their concerns and fears.

Our message today is clear and simple, humanity and fair treatment. We talk about justice in America. Our symbol of justice is that she is blind. Well not so much! Seemingly we have two Justice systems in America: one if you have money and power; another if you are poor and powerless. What's wrong with that? Is that the way we think about ourselves? I don't think so. We are a people of faith that compels us to love those who have lost their way and to help them find it again. And that is why we are here today to talk about how we help these individuals who are exposed to a particularly violent and deadly virus.

We cannot turn our backs on them because they made mistakes. I think not! I hope not! Will we let them languish with out caring and showing concern? I hope not! We thank you for this opportunity to present our message and our call for humanity. These people have every right for justice and fair treatment; and safety under our laws guaranteed by our constitution and the 14th amendment and due process.

We pray and hope that we will all come together and make a better life for our people who are incarcerated.”

CLOSING PRAYER: Rev. Fred Morton- MICAH Delegate for United Methodist Church- Memphis Metro District

“O Lord, as we depart, we pray your holy benediction on all our efforts on behalf of those most precious in your sight—the poor, the forgotten, the prisoner, the sick.

We know they are held in high regard in your counsels.

Grant that we all be awakened to your searing love that moves us to act in their behalf and bring in the day when justice and peace, your very holy shalom shall prevail in this community.

And all these things we pray in your most holy name.

Amen.”

In response to questions from the press at the end of the conference:

Rev. Ayanna Watkins, MICAHA Lead Organizer/ Executive Director

"MICAHA is not satisfied with one-and-done testing at SCDC or any of the county incarceration facilities. This pandemic and how we understand it changes every day. We can't afford to test once and hope for the best. And we can't stop with testing. We need dependable healthcare, hygiene products/practices, and responsiveness to the needs of those asking for care. We need release for those who are especially vulnerable to coronavirus and offer no societal benefit in remaining incarcerated.

[Re: the ACLU suit] MICAHA acknowledges that we're not the only voices in this space, calling for action. We recognize the ACLU, Just City, Vecindarios901, Black Lives Matter, and other voices also sounding the call for greater humanity and humane treatment of those who have been incarcerated. It shows how many of us know and are willing to say that it's not right to throw away human beings--we all deserve care and dignity. And we will continue to press until it comes to pass."