

Every month since February 1987 the Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation has produced one-hour TV programs on issues related to peace, social justice, economics, the environment, and nonviolence.

The Olympia FOR's program airs several times every week for the entire month on Thurston Community Television (TCTV), channel 22 for Thurston County's cable TV subscribers. You can see TCTV's schedule at www.tctv.net.

You can also watch the program described below (and more than 90 of our previous interview programs and special programs) at the Olympia FOR's website, www.olympiafor.org. Simply click the TV programs link to reach www.olympiafor.org/tv_programs.htm, scroll down, and click the program you want to watch.

Many of our website's TV program listings also include a .pdf document describing the program.

AUGUST 2012

"HOW TO REFORM PRISONS AND SENTENCING"

by GLEN ANDERSON, PRODUCER AND HOST OF THIS TV SERIES

Many people have observed that a good way to judge a society is by how it treats the people on the bottom. People in prison are among those at the bottom of our society.

Many people want to grind them farther into the dirt and diminish their humanity. But what happens when they get out of prison? Society will reap what it has sown. Society's contempt for them will flow back upon society at large.

The moral and sensible solution is to break the cycle – to restore every person's full humanity. If we want to live in a decent society, we must treat every person with decency, including those who have made mistakes.

The US imprisons more people than any other nation on earth.

Longer sentences are imposed here too. Recently, in the US, more than 127,000 persons were serving life sentences in state or federal prisons. About a fourth of those – about 33,000 persons – were serving sentences of "Life Without Parole." From 1992 to 2003 – in just 11 years – the number of lifers almost doubled. This was caused because the laws imposed longer sentences, not by an increase

in the crime rate. Actually, even while crime rates were declining, governments kept imposing harsher sentences.

For several decades our criminal justice system has been not only dysfunctional, but actually counter-productive!

Congress and state legislatures have been passing laws requiring longer sentences, eliminating parole, cutting back on efforts to educate and rehabilitate, and making it harder for people to reintegrate back into society upon release.

One counter-productive result of this has been that a large portion of the people who eventually are released from prison can't get decent places to live, can't get jobs, and have other impediments to turning their lives around. Their only way to make a living is to commit more crimes.

Vengeful laws and policies are counter-productive also from a budgetary standpoint. The prison system now consumes an extremely large portion of every state's budget. Legislatures have cut funding for K-12 and college education in order to fund more prisons and longer sentences.

Our TV programs suggests several ways to reform our criminal justice system in humane ways. Solutions include implementing a variety of rehabilitation programs, supporting education and job training, restoring parole, and helping people reintegrate into society upon release.

A fresh and humane way to dealing with crime is to use “Restorative Justice.” While the mainstream system focuses only on catching and punishing “bad guys,” Restorative Justice recognizes that a crime reveals a brokenness in community and seeks to heal that brokenness. Restorative Justice pays equal attention to the victim as to the offender, and it provides healing for the victim at the same time as it provides humane accountability for the offender.

We have two knowledgeable and wise guests:

Steven Aldrich lobbies for a Quaker-based non-profit organization, the Friends Committee on Washington Public Policy, www.fcwpp.org

Carol Estes co-founded a non-profit organization that provides post-secondary education inside prisons, University Beyond Bars, www.universitybeyondbars.org.

We also encourage you to visit the Olympia FOR’s website to watch our previous programs about related topics, including Three-Strikes laws, restorative justice, and the death penalty. See www.olympiafor.org, click the TV Programs link, and scroll down, and click a program you want to watch.