

Open Letter to the Hon. Governor Andrew Cuomo from Nobel Peace Laureates and world humanitarian and religious leaders urging clemency for David Gilbert

November 2020

The extraordinary October 3, 2020 Papal Encyclical calls for “a better kind of politics” based on rethinking social charity and justice approaches to the death penalty, and “forgiving not forgetting.” We write with those sentiments in mind, aware that inordinately long prison sentences are designed more for punishment and revenge than rehabilitation and remorse. Rarely has there been a person in prison who demonstrates the unconscionable folly of such sentences as much as David Gilbert.

Gilbert is a seventy-six-year-old man who has served thirty-nine years in New York state prisons for his participation as an unarmed getaway driver during the 1981 Brinks robbery. He has long taken responsibility for his role, apologized to the victim families through appropriate channels, and been a mentor and teacher to younger incarcerated men. He has consistently promoted peaceful conflict resolution inside prison. Remarkably, David has served his nearly four-decade imprisonment without a single institutional violation, a unique and exemplary record evincing respectful behavior.

As international humanitarian and human rights advocates, recognized for our own work for peace and nonviolence in Ireland, South Africa, the USA and elsewhere, we urge you to use your clemency power to free David Gilbert, as well as other remorseful elder prisoners serving inordinately long prison sentences.

We do this in part with the Covid-19 pandemic in mind: However long these sentences are, they were not intended to be a death penalty. We see daily that elders in prison, especially those with compromised immune systems and underlying health concerns, are in grave danger and many have died. For us, like you and your father before you, opposition to the death penalty is a religious and moral principle.

We are confident that David Gilbert’s release presents no threat to public safety. To the contrary, his release would help peacefully resolve an era of tragic conflict. It would also serve as encouragement to others incarcerated, demonstrating that no matter how serious the crime, society will recognize that someone can apply themselves to study and reflection and become a new person with the ability to contribute to their communities and families. David’s good work during his decades of incarceration, improving through peer-based education how prisons dealt with HIV/AIDS, showcases how prisoners can encourage one another towards positive transformation. Hundreds, possibly thousands of lives were saved.

Among those of us supporting the call for clemency are Nobel Peace laureates awarded for our efforts to bring an end to armed confrontation through peaceful resolution. When His Holiness Pope Francis acknowledged non-Catholics in his Encyclical, Desmond Tutu, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, and Mahatma Gandhi were the three specifically named by the Holy Father.

Similarly inspired by Archbishop Emeritus Tutu, who initiated this call in an appeal he wrote years ago, we all—including Gandhi’s beloved granddaughter and Dr. King’s daughter—join in his assertion that “our common beliefs in renewal, rehabilitation, and positive change all provide a foundation which makes it possible for Governor Cuomo to grant freedom.” As David Gilbert remains a witness to generations of injustice and violence, we are moved to urge Governor Cuomo to take positive action—in the spirit of this season at this historic moment. As a sign of healing, especially in response to the Covid-19 crisis, we pray that Governor Cuomo will exercise his authority and grant clemency to David and other elders in prison at risk from the coronavirus.

Signed,

- Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Mpilo Tutu, Anglican Church of Southern Africa; 1984 Nobel Peace Laureate
- Ambassador Thandi Luthuli, South African former representative to South America, daughter of 1960 Nobel Peace Laureate Chief Albert Luthuli
- Ela Gandhi, South African former Member of Parliament; granddaughter of Mohandas K. Gandhi
- Rev. Dr. Bernice King, CEO, The King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, daughter of 1964 Nobel Peace Laureate Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Mairead Corrigan Maguire, 1976 Nobel Peace Laureate; co-founder, Northern Ireland Community of Peace People
- Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, 1980 Nobel Peace Laureate; Argentine recipient of the Pope John XXIII Peace Memorial and Founder, Servicio Paz y Justicia-América Latina
- Jose Ramos-Horta, 1996 Nobel Peace Laureate; former Prime Minister and President, Timor-Leste
- Joyce Ajlouny, General Secretary, American Friends Service Committee (1947 Nobel Peace Laureate)
- The Most Reverend Michael Bruce Curry, The 27th Presiding Bishop and Primate of The Episcopal Church
- Monsignor Marc Camille Michel Stenger, Bishop of Troyes, France; Co-President, Pax Christi International
- Sister Teresia Wachira, Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Kenya), Co-President, Pax Christi International
- The Most Reverend John Eric Stowe, Bishop President of Pax Christi USA, Bishop of Lexington (KY)
- The Most Reverend Thomas Gumbleton, Bishop President Emeritus of Pax Christi USA, Auxiliary Bishop of Detroit (Ret.)
- Jim Winkler, President and General Secretary, National Council of Churches of Christ, USA
- Rev. Dr. John Dorhauer, General Minister and President, United Church of Christ
- The Most Reverend Joseph R. Kopacz, Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Jackson (MS)
- Marie Dennis, Co-President (2007-2019), Pax Christi International
- John Zokovitch, Executive Director, Pax Christi USA; former Senior Communications Officer, Pax Christi International

- Rev. Dr. Susan Frederick-Gray, President, Unitarian Universalist Association
- Rev. Rick Ufford-Chase, Moderator, 216th General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (USA)
- Rev. Dr. Andrew Murray, former Moderator, Church of the Brethren
- The Most Reverend Leah D. Daughtry, Presiding Bishop, The House of the Lord Churches
- Imam Al-Hajj Talib 'Abdur-Rashid, The Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood Inc.; Deputy Ameer (Vice President) of The Muslim Alliance in North America
- Rev. Aundreia Alexander, Esq., Associate General Secretary, Action and Advocacy for Justice and Peace, National Council of Churches of Christ, USA
- Rev. Dr. Emma Jordan-Simpson, Executive Director, Fellowship of Reconciliation; Executive Pastor, Concord Baptist Church of Christ; former Executive Director, Children's Defense Fund-New York
- Rabbi Arthur Waskow, Director, The Shalom Center; Founder, ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal
- Rabbi Michael Lerner, Editor, *Tikkun* magazine; Co-Director, Network of Spiritual Progressives
- Rabbi Jessica Rosenberg, Jewish Voice for Peace Rabbinical Council
- Rabbi Alissa Wise, Co-Executive Director, Jewish Voice for Peace
- The Right Rev. Andrew ML Dietsche, XVI Bishop of New York, The Episcopal Diocese of New York
- The Right Rev. Allen K. Shin, Bishop Suffragan, The Episcopal Diocese of New York
- The Right Rev. Mary D. Glasspool, Bishop Assistant, The Episcopal Diocese of New York
- Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis, Co-Chair, Poor Peoples Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival; Director, Kairos Center for Religions, Rights and Social Justice, Union Theological Seminary-New York
- Rev. Dr. Samuel Cruz, Senior Pastor, Trinity Lutheran Church; Professor of Religion and Society, Union Theological Seminary-New York
- Rev. Emily Brewer, Executive Director, Presbyterian Peace Fellowship
- Melanie Merkle Atha, Executive Director, Episcopal Peace Fellowship
- Rev. Dr. Doris Garcia Rivera, Interim Executive Director, Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America-Bautistas por la Paz
- Rabbi Philip Bentley, President Emeritus, Jewish Peace Fellowship
- Dr. Emily Welty, New York City-based disarmament, inter-faith, and human rights academic; NGO representative to the United Nations
- Professor Michelle Alexander, Union Theological Seminary-New York
- Professor Matt Meyer, Secretary-General, International Peace Research Association
- Lumumba Akinwole-Bandele, Director of Community Organizing, NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund (2015-2020)
- Beverly Keene, International Coordinator, Jubilee South/ Americas, Argentina
- Monifa Bandele, Leadership Team, Movement for Black Lives; Senior Vice President, MomsRising
- Sister Elizabeth McAlister, Founder, Jonah House and member, Kings Bay Plowshares community