

To: Delegates Clippinger, Moon, and members of the Judiciary Committee

From: Rev. Dr. Marlon B. Tilghman, Pastor of Ames UMC Bel, Co-Chair within BRIDGE Maryland, Inc., Transformational Justice, and Member of the Maryland Youth Justice Coalition.
Dual Residencies of District 44 & District 34B

Dear Delegates,

BRIDGE Maryland, Inc. offers this moral imperative from members of our interfaith organization. Children and teens are influenced by authority and at risk of emotional, cultural, and situational trauma if placed in adult situations prematurely. Our sacred texts teach us that children are an inheritance from God (Psalm 127:3-5). And that God wants our children treated justly (Exodus 22:22-23); and treating children and teens like adults, in callous disposable ways affects a child's future and offends the Creator of us all (Matthew 18:10). I believe the YES Act is what Michael Eric Dyson meant when he said, "Justice is what love sounds like when it speaks in public."

And the love that Mr. Dyson is referring to is *agape*, which is Greek for unconditional love. A love that sees everyone as a human being despite what you may or may not like about that person. So, what upsets members of our faith community is that some lawmakers and opponents want to classify teens as adults so that they can punish them with what they classify as the same cognitive abilities as adults. However, science has proven that to be false, the same way it was false to classify people of Color as inferior which would justify dehumanizing with, statutes, rules and laws. Some lawmakers and opponents want to live by the Old Testament theology of an eye for an eye which only leaves everyone blind to the truth that love is how justice prevails particularly for the most vulnerable people on the planet which are children that cannot vote for lawmakers that determine their quality of life. And if we continue to put teens in the adult penalty system, they may never have the right to impact democracy in this country.

As lawmakers and citizens, I ask you: Is that how we ought to train a child in the way they should go, so that when they are old, hopelessness is all they know? What disturbs members of our faith community is that some lawmakers and opponents want to classify teens as adults as if they are unredeemable because any reasonably righteous person knows that the adult prison system is not designed for rehabilitation but for perpetual incarceration. Granted a small

percentage of impacted people have survived the adult system but far too many, particularly teens, aren't mature enough to get that chance.

And if I may make this personal, my son was diagnosed with ADHD as a child only to be misdiagnosed because the symptoms mimicked bipolar disorder. Because of his mental illness, he made bad decisions, but administrators, counselors, and my wife and I holistically dealt with his decisions through diet, team sports, mentoring organizations, and the church.

My son also had encounters with law enforcement because he fit the description, “Dark skin, tall, wore a hoodie, and pants worn below the waist. He was pulled over twice walking three blocks going to the 7-eleven and returning home. And my son, with bipolar, in his manic state, making the wrong decision, could have gone to jail with adults.

What frightens me more is that my grandchildren can face that situation today. If an officer decides to escalate a situation which I've witnessed personnel and in the media. Or if a bystander decides to report an incident without proper details and a child goes to jail in an adult system—the trauma that insues is unnecessary. I firmly believe that poverty, greed and hyperbole media are what's driving imprisonments, and the Y.E.S. Act is a commonsense step in the right direction to curb the panic about our children who need care and not cages. **We employ you to vote in favor of HB96.**