Raise the Age to raise kids’ potential

By Jenny Kinne
June 1, 2018

As part of Youth Justice Sunday on April 29, I had the honor of speaking to congregants and community members at Fountain Street Church. The church has long been a pillar of justice in the community and is highly regarded for its commitment to advocating for people who are facing economic, social and political injustices. On this particular morning, we came together to raise up the needs of kids in Grand Rapids and around the state and raise awareness on what we all can do to help them.

A big opportunity to do that is called Raise the Age, a policy currently awaiting action by the Michigan Legislature. Seventeen-year-olds in Michigan are not allowed to drop out of school, vote, enlist in the military without parental consent, purchase tobacco, fireworks or lottery tickets; however, they can be put in adult prison. Michigan is one of five states in this country that automatically tries 17-year-olds as adults in our criminal justice system. In doing so, it is squandering these kids’ potential and putting them at physical, mental, emotional and financial risk.

If we truly care for youth in our communities, we must change this law. The Raise the Age campaign is working at the state level to make sure that 17-year-olds aren’t forced into the adult prison system. Between 2003 and 2013, 20,291 youth were convicted as adults in Michigan. Ninety-five percent of those youth was 17 at the time of the offense. Some were even younger.

There are many reasons why this should wake us up as a community:

1. Seventeen-year-olds are much more likely to experience violence and sexual assault while in prison. This has led to higher rates of PTSD, mental illness and suicide among youth.

2. By refusing 17-year-olds access to the juvenile justice system, we give them a criminal record at a very young age, making it difficult to seek employment in the future. A woman I met named Briana was convicted as an adult at 17 years old in Michigan, and she is very frank about the difficulties she faces getting back on her feet more than a decade later: “I wish that I could say I have recovered from my criminal history, but the fact is I have not. It follows me at every turn. When applying for my cosmetology license, college, an internship … It will follow me in all my future career applications. Will I always be paying for the mistakes I have made so many years ago? Will people be able to see past my mistakes and take me seriously?”

3. We know that 17-year-olds’ brains are not fully developed. This is an incredibly vulnerable age in which young people are not completely aware of the consequences associated with personal decisions. Our adult corrections system is focused on retribution, while our juvenile system is more focused on rehabilitation. Seventeen-year-olds need access to rehabilitative services so they get the support they need to live a happy and healthy life. When the Raise the Age campaign held an event at LINC Up last fall, a couple of people told their stories. One of the storytellers asked an important question of the audience: Do you remember what you were doing at 17? No one is especially proud of some of their decisions at 17. Certainly, decisions being made at that age should not determine the opportunity you have available to you for the rest of your life.

4. There are significant racial disparities in rates of youth incarceration. Fifty-three percent of youth entering the Michigan Department of Corrections at 17 are youth of color, even though youth of color only make up 23 percent of the population statewide. As a community, we need to be working toward a more equitable and
just society, and looking at these rates, it is obvious that our struggles with institutional racism are impacting our children.

5. We spend millions of dollars as a state to imprison 17-year-olds as adults, and we see higher recidivism rates, greater likelihood to commit violent crime, and lost economic and educational opportunity. This is not only an unethical system, it is an unintelligent investment. We can be a whole lot more effective in how we spend our tax dollars.

What would you do if your 17-year-old child were sent to adult prison? Or the child of a friend? Or even you when you were 17? You would fight this policy. And regardless of the scenario, you still should. All residents and organizations have an important role to play in advocating for ethical public policy that takes care of the most vulnerable members of our community — our children. Here’s what you can do to help raise the age.

You can start by visiting raisetheagemi.org and signing onto the campaign’s Statement of Principles as an individual or as an entire organization. Here are a few of the West Michigan area organizations who have signed on so far: Access of West Michigan, Grand Rapids Urban League, Heartside Ministry, Literacy Center of West Michigan, Partners for a Racism-Free Community, Restorative Justice Coalition of West Michigan and The Micah Center. You also can reach out to your county- and state-elected officials to voice your support of Raise the Age. We need a lot of local people putting pressure on our state officials to get this done. You have the power to make a difference and push for this important change for our youth and the future of our community.

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