



# Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry

A voice for justice, equality and compassion in New Jersey

## *Speaking out on Criminal Justice Reform and Ending the New Jim Crow*

### ***Statement on Use of Solitary Confinement***

Criminal justice reform addresses not only the broad system that places vast, unprecedented numbers of people under its control but must also look at the conditions and practices of that control. Fueled by a widespread mindset of ‘revenge’ and of being ‘tough on crime’ rather than on correction, departments of correction have normalized and allowed prison practices which meet the standard of cruel and unusual punishment. This is most evident in the widespread use of solitary confinement.

Individuals have been placed in solitary confinement, most typically in a small windowless cell, up to 23 hours a day, with limited or no access to activity, movement, social interaction or sensory stimulation. This confinement may continue without limit and often unmonitored for as long as many months, years and even decades. It has been characterized by survivors as being ‘buried alive’. This is often done for casual, vengeful or political reasons and without any form of due process. Research shows that prolonged isolation can cause devastating and sometimes irreparable trauma and is especially dangerous for youth, the elderly and those with mental illness or cognitive disabilities. As practiced in the U. S., including New Jersey, the use of solitary confinement violates the standards established by the United Nations Convention Against Torture (Article 1) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Articles 7, 10, and 16).

Estimates are that, at any time, up to 80,000 individuals are in some form of isolated confinement nationally and up to several thousand in New Jersey. This practice is used in a system that disproportionately victimizes poor people and people of color. New Jersey ranks third in the nation for the disparity between African American’s percentage of the population (15%) and their percentage of the state’s prison population (61%). This racially disproportionate sentencing and incarceration predicts a similar racially disproportionate use of solitary confinement.

Rather than being a carefully implemented and monitored form of ‘close supervision’ or ‘protective custody’ as many correction departments claim, the sheer numbers in solitary confinement nationwide show that it has become an accepted method of control, intimidation and behavior modification. To isolate human beings, subjecting them to extremes of noise, temperature and sleep disruption, for excessive periods of time destroys the human psyche.

As the National Religious Campaign Against Torture’s Statement of Conscience states, solitary confinement “violates the basic dignity of the human person that all religions in their highest ideals hold dear. It degrades everyone involved -- policy makers, perpetrators and victims. It

contradicts our nation's most cherished ideals. Any policies that permit torture and inhumane treatment are shocking and morally intolerable."

As a faith community committed to honoring the inherent worth and dignity of every person, to the dismantling of racism and to justice, equality and compassion in human relations, we stand strongly against the current use of solitary confinement in U. S. and New Jersey prisons and jails. We call for and support activity and legislation designed to radically reform the practices of all forms of isolated confinement in all government or private correctional facilities to conform to humane, controlled standards.

*For Further Information, Please Contact:*

*Rev. Craig Hirshberg, Executive Director*

*4 Waldron Avenue, Summit, NJ 07901*

*609-672-7331 director@uulmnj.org*

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