

UULMNJ Background Statement on the Marijuana Laws April 15, 2015

UULMNJ is considering taking a stand on the legalization of Marijuana. This is a bold step for a faith community. We take it with considerable forethought and awareness of its implications for our society. Marijuana is not considered part of a healthy life style, no more or less than the use of tobacco or alcohol. UULMNJ is not endorsing the use of marijuana. The UULMNJ position is based on the concern for social justice. The current drug policy laws are far more detrimental to a person's life than the use of the substance.

The taxation and regulation of marijuana is not a new issue for Unitarian Universalists. In 1970, the UMA passed a general resolution calling for the legalization of marijuana. It stated in part that the local, state and federal laws in the United States regarding the growing, sale, trade, possession and consumption of cannabis sativa (marijuana) are based largely on public hysteria and myth, rather than on any established data about the effects of marijuana on the user

It also stated that the present laws are making criminals of and causing undue and unjust punishment to many persons who have no criminal intent in the use of marijuana; and are being used as political weapons against those people, especially the young, who dissent in politics or lifestyle from the accepted norms; It states that no reliable research on the effects of marijuana has shown its use to be as hazardous to the public or the individual user as the use of tobacco, alcohol or many other stimulants and depressants legally available to the public.

The 1970 resolution urged

- That all local, state and federal laws in the United States making the growing, sale, trade and possession of marijuana a criminal offense be immediately repealed;
- That restrictions on the use of marijuana be made similar to those laws on the use of alcoholic beverages;
- That any effects of the consumption of marijuana that may be found injurious to the user be handled by the proper psychological and medical care and not by criminal law;
- That amnesty be given to all persons convicted under present laws relating to the growing, sale, trade, possession and consumption of marijuana and that charges be dropped against all persons presently under indictment for violation of such laws;

- And that the federal government expand existing research and to establish the machinery whereby all available findings, statistics, and observations may be gathered and evaluated to provide an effective study of the legal, social and medical questions arising from the use of marijuana.

Now fast-forward 45 years. Some things have changed. We have learned that marijuana has some significant medical use in controlling seizures and pain. We have learned that a number of states have either decriminalized or legalized the use of the substance, allowing for significant regulation and taxation. Sadly, though, we now have documented the hundreds of thousands of lives that have been ruined because of arrest and incarceration due to minor drug charges. The cruel realities of these minor drug arrests have limited employment, education, family relationships and future opportunity for those who have been caught in these draconian policies. And young men of color have particularly suffered. The call of our faith communities to demand regulation and taxation of marijuana is a call for justice. It is a call for compassion.

Marijuana Reform is fast becoming a central focus of current efforts to dismantle the mass incarceration/'new jim crow' system and its widespread destructive effects on society and the lives of millions.

In 2013 there were almost 700,000 marijuana arrests in the U. S., more than 45% of all drug arrests and more than for all violent crimes combined. This is a major part of the mass incarceration system which makes us, by far, the largest imprisonment country in the world. Yet marijuana continues to be the most widely used illicit drug, admittedly at one time or another, by more than 114 million Americans. Marijuana arrests disproportionately target and affect people of color by rates nearly four times greater than others despite data showing very similar usage rates across racial and ethnic lines. Our State of New Jersey typically accounts for more than 20,000 possession arrests annually with some counties showing arrest disparities of 4 or 5 times greater for people of color.

Criminalization of marijuana, and resulting incarceration and stigmatization, cripples lives and serves to increase rather than constructively address problems of drug use.

Eighteen states and Washington D. C. have enacted or initiated approaches to decriminalize marijuana possession. Five of these have lifted the prohibition of marijuana altogether with various approaches to control and regulation. About two dozen countries have taken steps toward drug decriminalization and legalization with constructive programs most notably Portugal, Czech Republic, Netherlands,

Uruguay, Colombia and Argentina. This experience has demonstrated societal benefits and little or no increase in drug use or crime.

Decriminalization along with treatment programs when properly implemented can

- Substantially reduce arrests and incarceration and the crippling effects of a criminal record,
- Increase drug treatment and public health and safety,
- Reduce criminal victimization of people of color,
- Reduce criminal justice and incarceration costs and make funds available for needed social programs,
- Help redirect law enforcement efforts to prevent serious and violent crimes,
- Improve relations between law enforcement and the communities.

The UULMNJ supports measures directed to eliminate criminal penalties for marijuana possession and to a broad expansion of harm reduction and drug treatment programs. In addition we support a serious examination and discussion of regulatory alternatives to drug prohibition to address the major drug related societal ills not alleviated by simple decriminalization. The New Jersey Unitarian Universalist Congregations are invited and urged to join us in this effort and discussion to eliminate this obstacle to social progress.

Informational and reference material is attached.