

Thank you for hearing from me, Patricia Teel Bates, a citizen living in Homer, Louisiana, and a United Methodist ordained deacon. Formerly a professor of English at LSU in Shreveport, I have volunteered off and on for a number of years to teach literacy and to lead worship in several North LA jails and prisons. Also I am in active ministry with families of the incarcerated in Louisiana. Most recently I have ministered with Mr. Michael Mable, brother of Mr. Albert Woodfox, the last of the “Angola 3,” who is in solitary confinement a few miles from where I live at David Wade Correctional Center. Learning that Albert had been in solitary for over 40 years despite the fact that his conviction for murder of an Angola prison guard had been overturned, I joined a group of advocates in Baton Rouge to petition our AG Buddy Caldwell to release Mr. Woodfox. A few days afterward, I received a call from the DWCC chaplain, saying I could no longer volunteer there. Following that, I attended a 5th Circuit Court of Appeals hearing in New Orleans to listen as objectively as I might to attorneys arguing legal details regarding the Woodfox case. I now believe Albert Woodfox may be a political prisoner due to his involvement at Angola State Penitentiary as a Black Panther organizer for prisoner rights. Reading Nelson Mandela’s *Long Road to Freedom*, I’m struck by some notable parallels.

Through my experiences and considerable study relating to the use of solitary confinement in the United States, I am convinced of the egregious injustice of the use of extended solitary confinement, especially in Louisiana. Our cradle to prison pipeline and excessive use of long-term solitary calls for a thorough investigation by the US Department of Justice as well as by the US Congress and by your judiciary subcommittee. Louisiana’s people of color, the poor, and the poorly educated (who tend not to be active and vocal in civic affairs unless they are caught up in our criminal justice system) are especially at risk of injustice.

As a bit of context, you may know that Louisiana leads the nation and hence the world in incarcerating its citizens per capita. Are we truly the worst of the worst in the world? One of the State’s practices for “controlling” its so-called worst trouble makers is to confine them for extended periods (even decades) in solitary units. This practice of isolating offenders from other human beings has undergone study by other states including neighboring Mississippi, which has significantly reduced its use of solitary following the study. Other states such as New York are also questioning past practices relating to use of solitary and are proposing legislative change.

As a member of the ecumenical faith community of Louisiana, I ask the US Senate Judiciary to examine the use of solitary units in Louisiana and beyond. Look at the record: How many suicides are committed or narrowly averted in solitary, compared to general populations of offenders? Considering that the vast majority of offenders will reenter our neighborhoods and homes, how helpful is long-term solitary/isolation in preparing them to become productive citizens and family members? What if we spent more on early childhood education in underserved populations; could we reduce excessive expenditures on use of solitary?

Look at the record of those in isolation for extended periods and consider the traumatic injury done to the offender and to society. Louisiana has a program known as Victim-Offender Dialogue, which aids the victim in telling the offender the harm that has been done in order to promote healing for the victim and to help the offender make amends to the extent possible. How does the use of solitary contribute to the VOD program, which I have supported through private church-related funding.

If we believe in the sacred worth of every human being, no matter the wrongs committed, how can we justify treating any human being inhumanely, as extended use of solitary does? When we perpetuate such injustice, our own humanity is diminished. Our system of justice is flawed. “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” MLK Jr.