

**Testimony of
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Before the
Senate Judiciary Committee
Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights
Hearing on Reassessing Solitary Confinement
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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of the United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society concerning the harmful use of solitary confinement in our nation's federal prisons, jails, and detention centers. We are encouraged that this committee has chosen to focus a hearing solely on reassessing the use of solitary confinement, the first hearing of its kind. This comes at a time when a growing number of states across the nation are also reassessing this practice and implementing policies to limit its use. We believe that this committee will find that solitary confinement is a moral failure as well as an unnecessary financial burden on the federal and state governments.

The United Methodist Church is the third largest denomination in the United States and has over 11 million members worldwide. The General Board of Church and Society is tasked with bringing "the whole of human life, activities, possessions, use of resources, and community and world relationships into conformity with the will of God. It shall show the members of the Church and society that the reconciliation that God effected through Christ involves personal, social, and civic righteousness."

Across the United States inmates and detainees are being confined in a small cell for 22-24 hours per day for weeks, months, even years at a time. The United States leads the world in its use of solitary confinement, a dubious distinction. Some estimates claim that at least 80,000 people in the U.S. criminal justice system are held in solitary confinement. The 2006 Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons issued a report, *Confronting Confinement*, stated that from 1995 to 2000, the growth rate of segregation units significantly surpassed the prison growth rate overall: 40% compared to 28%.

There have been numerous studies that have shown the harmful psychological effects of long-term solitary confinement. Some of these effects include hallucinations, paranoia, panic attacks, and even suicidal ideation. The 2006 Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons noted that among the dozens of studies on the use of solitary confinement conducted since the 1970s, there was not a single study of non-voluntary solitary confinement lasting more than 10 days that did not document negative psychiatric symptoms in its subjects.

The United Methodist Church believes that every person is created in the image of God. Considering the severe harm done to individuals through the use of solitary confinement its use must be condemned. Scriptures are clear that we must regard the inherent value of each person as sacred. Jesus is so protective of the sacredness of each person that he identifies with those who are incarcerated and the failure of his followers to acknowledge and protect their sacredness when he states, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me" (Matthew 25:45). The early Church was instructed to continue Jesus' high regard for the sacredness of each individual as it is written, "Remember those in prison as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured" (Hebrews 13:3).

The United Methodist Church has long held the importance of recognizing and protecting the sacred worth of each individual, especially among those who are incarcerated. We work and advocate for “the creation of a genuinely new system for the care and restoration of victims, offenders, criminal justice officials and the community as a whole.” (2008 *United Methodist Book of Discipline*) Solitary confinement is not restorative, but rather is retributive and does not recognize or protect the sacred worth of each individual.

According to Article I of the United Nations Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, which states in part, “the term ‘torture’ means any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person.” The United Methodist Church stands unequivocally against the use of torture. “Mistreatment or torture, and other cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment or punishment of persons by governments for any purpose violates Christian teaching and must be condemned and/or opposed by Christians and churches wherever and whenever it occurs.” (2008 *United Methodist Book of Discipline*) Solitary confinement is a form of torture and must be ended.

Moreover, solitary confinement is a financial drain on society. Super-max prisons are much more expensive to build than other housing facilities. Additionally, the daily cost per inmate in a solitary confinement unit far exceeds the costs of housing an inmate in lower security facility. The 2006 Commission on Safety and Abuse in America’s Prisons found that housing inmates in solitary confinement can double the normal cost of incarceration since solitary confinement units require individual cells and significantly more staff. Some experts believe that this can run as much as \$50,000 more annually compared to general population housing.

Further, solitary confinement has a negative impact on the re-entry of returning citizens to their communities and thus, can be a detriment to public safety. Inmates who have been held in solitary confinement are significantly more likely to recommit crimes than those who have been held in the general prison population. For example, the 2006 Commission on safety and Abuse in America’s Prisons cited a Washington state study of over 8,000 former prisoners. The study found that people who were released directly from solitary confinement had a much higher rate of recidivism than individuals who spent some time in the general prison population before returning to the community. Public safety is best enhanced when those who are currently incarcerated are given access to educational classes and social programs to prepare them for a successful re-entry to society and with their families.

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee, the United Methodist Church believes strongly that the United States should do everything it can to reverse our nation’s harmful and expensive reliance on solitary confinement. This is a profound moral issue and we have a moral obligation to uphold the sacred worth of each person currently incarcerated. To that end, we would strongly support your leadership in sponsoring legislation that would dramatically limit or end entirely the use and length of solitary confinement. We implore you to immediately take steps to end the use of prolonged solitary confinement. Your hearing today is a very important effort in doing that, and we thank you for the opportunity to contribute to it.