Ending Torture, from the Inside Out

By: Rev. Laura Markle Downton

In the words of Wendell Berry; “If change is to come, it will come from the margins. It was the desert, not the temple that gave us the prophets.” In the United States today, prisons, jails and detention centers are our desert and those who are confined are at the margins. To find the prophets of today, one must go behind bars. On his first visit to the United States, Pope Francis will do just that, visiting the Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility in Philadelphia to meet with incarcerated people and their loved ones.

The U.S. is a global outlier in its use of mass incarceration and systemic use of solitary confinement. On any given day in the United States, it is estimated that between 80,000 to 100,000 adults and youth – disproportionately people of color, individuals with mental illness and those living in poverty – are held in solitary. That number does not include people in local jails, juvenile facilities, or in military and immigration detention. Many are there as a result of draconian mandatory minimum sentencing, racial and religious profiling, the war on drugs, because of a mental illness, or as a result of addiction. Others are in jail, detained pre-trial because they could not afford bail. Beyond the statistics, they are mothers, uncles, fathers, nephews, daughters and sons. They are people, and as our faith traditions affirm, endowed with dignity, sacred worth and tremendous gifts.

Isolated confinement has a variety of names: "the box," segregation ("seg"), "the hole." In solitary, incarcerated people are confined to a cell (alone, or with another person) for 22-24 hours per day, with an hour alone in an exercise cage. Denied meaningful human interaction for months, years, even decades, those who have survived it describe the experience as being "buried alive."

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, Juan Méndez, stated in a 2011 report that solitary confinement in excess of 15 days should "be subject to an absolute prohibition" based on scientific evidence of its psychological damage. He called for a ban on its use for those with mental illness, pregnant women, and youth. Isolation fundamentally alters the brain, creates and exacerbates mental illness, denies opportunity for community, and violates basic human rights. It creates toxic environments for incarcerated people, correctional staff and administrators. Half of all prison suicides occur in conditions of solitary confinement.
In a speech this summer at the NAACP National Convention, President Obama fundamentally questioned the use of solitary, announcing the U.S. Attorney General would conduct a nationwide review of the practice.

A series of prisoner-led hunger strikes in California prisons in 2011 and 2013, the last of which more than 30,000 incarcerated people took part, was accompanied by a call for unity in the form of the “Agreement to End Hostilities,” when incarcerated people held in isolation in Pelican Bay, California state prison called for the cessation of all hostilities between racial groups in all California prisons and county jails. Family members and loved ones of those incarcerated organized on the outside to get the word out about the call for unity and call for an end to torture being issued by those on the inside. These prophetic actions have led to seismic shifts in national and international awareness of the horrors of solitary, the racism used to justify it, and the necessity that people of faith work together to end it.

From coast to coast, the movement to end the torture of solitary confinement is alive and growing, and as people of faith, we are called to advance the prophetic call for an end to torture. To that end, NRCAT worked with filmmaker Matthew Gossage to release *Breaking Down the Box*, a new 40-minute documentary for communities of faith, to expose the torture of solitary confinement in the context of mass incarceration in the United States. The film, available here for viewing, examines the mental health, racial justice and human rights implications of the systemic use of solitary confinement in U.S. prisons. It is a call to action for communities of faith to engage in the growing nationwide movement for restorative alternatives to isolated confinement that prioritize restorative justice and human rights. Download the Discussion Guide to accompany a screening of the film in your congregation, organization, or community. Promote your screening with our customizable poster.

The National Religious Campaign Against Torture is calling on people of faith throughout the U.S. to join the Together to End Solitary nationwide actions on the 23rd of every month. Communities of faith are invited to host monthly actions to call for an end to the torture of solitary, at the recommendation of people incarcerated in Pelican Bay prison who led the momentous hunger strikes in California prisons. Here is how you can join us on the 23rd of each month:

- Host a screening of NRCAT's new documentary, *Breaking Down The Box*. DVD order form, an interfaith viewing guide, and sample poster are also available at www.nrcat.org/breakingdownthebox.
Download and share the NRCAT Together to End Solitary bulletin insert to spread the word with your faith community.

Sign and share the Statement Against Prolonged Solitary Confinement

Organize a vigil to speak out against solitary confinement and stand with survivors.

Host a letter writing campaign to your legislators to call for an end to solitary. Here's a sample message to get you started.

Host a chalk-in: draw a 6x9 ft box with chalk and sit in it, symbolizing the average dimensions of a cell people spend 23 hours a day for months, years and decades in solitary.

Share photos and updates about your action on Twitter and Facebook. Follow us at @nrcattweets and use the hashtag #STOPsolitary #together

The prophets of our day are speaking. Will we hear them, and will we join them? Together we can end the torture of solitary confinement and make human rights a reality for all people.

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