

Alternatives to the “War on Drugs”

Statement of Conscience

Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations

Background: This final draft Statement of Conscience of the Unitarian Universalist Association builds upon four social witness statements on drug policy adopted by the Unitarian Universalist Association between 1965 and 1991. In June 2000, the General Assembly of the UUA selected “Alternatives to the ‘War on Drugs’” as the Study/Action Issue (SAI) suggested to congregations for two years of study, action, and reflection. The Commission on Social Witness (CSW) received initial reports from congregations and districts in March 2001. In June 2001, the CSW held a workshop on this issue at General Assembly. An initial draft Statement of Conscience was distributed to all congregations and districts for their reflection and feedback. At its March 2002 meeting, the CSW prepared a revised draft. It was placed on the final agenda of the June 2002 General Assembly. A mini-assembly was held on Friday, June 21, where proposed amendments were received. Friday evening, June 21, the CSW produced this final draft Statement of Conscience, based on the mini-assembly and the proposed amendments. The delegates present at the Saturday June 22 plenary adopted this Statement of Conscience with the required two-thirds majority.

OUR CALL TO END THE “WAR ON DRUGS” AS A MATTER OF CONSCIENCE

For more than 30 years, American public policy has advanced an escalating “war on drugs” that seeks to eradicate illegal drugs from our society. It is increasingly clear that this effort has failed. Our current drug policy has consumed tens of billions of dollars and wrecked countless lives. The costs of this policy include the increasing breakdown of families and neighborhoods, endangerment of children, widespread violation of civil liberties, escalating rates of incarceration, political corruption, and the imposition of United States policy abroad. For United States taxpayers, the price tag on the drug offensive has soared from \$66 million in 1968 to almost \$20 billion in 2000, an increase of over 30,000 percent. In practice the drug war disproportionately targets people of color and people who are poverty-stricken. Coercive measures have not reduced drug use, but they have clogged our criminal justice system with non-violent offenders. It is time to explore alternative approaches and to end this costly war.

The war on drugs has blurred the distinction between drug use and drug abuse. Drug use is erroneously perceived as behavior that is out of control and harmful to others. Illegal drug use is thus portrayed as threatening to society. As a result, drug policy has been closed to study, discussion, and consideration of alternatives by legislative bodies. Yet many people who use both legal and illegal drugs live productive, functional lives and do no harm to society.

As Unitarian Universalists committed to a free and responsible search for truth, we must protest the misguided policies that shape current practice. We cannot in good conscience remain quiet when it is becoming clear that we have been misled for decades about illegal drugs. United States government drug policy-makers have misled the world about the purported success of the war on drugs. They tell the public that success is dependent upon even more laws restricting constitutional protections and the allocation of billions of dollars for drug law enforcement. They mislead the public about the extent of corruption and environmental degradation in other countries that the American war on drugs has left in its wake.

As Unitarian Universalists committed to the inherent worth and dignity of every person and to justice, equity, and compassion in human relations, we call for thoughtful consideration and implementation of alternatives that regard the reduction of harm as the appropriate standard by which to assess drug policies. We seek a compassionate reduction of harm associated with drugs, both legal and illegal, with special attention to the harm unleashed by policies established

in the war on drugs.

As Unitarian Universalists committed to respecting the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part, we find irresponsible and morally wrong the practices of scorching the earth and poisoning the soil and ground water in other countries to stop the production of drugs that are illegal in the United States.

As a community of faith, Unitarian Universalists have both a moral imperative and a personal responsibility to ask the difficult questions that so many within our society are unable, unwilling, or too afraid to ask. In asking these questions and in weighing our findings, we are compelled to consider a different approach to national drug policy.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

To conceive and develop a more just and compassionate drug policy, it is necessary to transform how we view drugs and particularly drug addiction. Drug use, drug abuse, and drug addiction are distinct from one another. Using a drug does not necessarily mean abusing the drug, much less addiction to it. Drug abuse issues are essentially matters for medical attention. We do not believe that drug use should be considered criminal behavior. Advocates for harsh drug policies with severe penalties for drug use often cite violent crime as a direct result of drug use. Drugs alone do not cause crime. Legal prohibition of drugs leads to inflated street value, which in turn incites violent turf wars among distributors. The whole pattern is reminiscent of the proliferation of organized crime at the time of alcohol prohibition in the early twentieth century. That policy also failed.

We believe that the vision of a drug-free America is unrealistic. Many programs for school children have misled participants and the public by teaching that all illicit drugs are equally harmful in spite of current scientific research to the contrary. “Just Say No” is not a viable policy. The consequences of the current drug war are cruel and counterproductive. At issue here are the health and well being of our families and our communities, our societal fabric and our global community. Alternatives exist.

ALTERNATIVE GOALS

Based on this perspective, we believe appropriate and achievable goals for reformed national drug policies include:

- To prevent consumption of drugs, including alcohol and nicotine, that are harmful to health among children and adolescents;
- To reduce the likelihood that drug users will become drug abusers;
- To minimize the harmful effects of drug use, such as disease contracted from the use of contaminated needles and overdosing as a result of unwittingly using impure drugs;
- To increase the availability and affordability of quality drug treatment and eliminate the stigma associated with accessing it;
- To significantly reduce violent and predatory drug-related crime;
- To minimize the harmful consequences of current drug policy, such as racial profiling,

property confiscation without conviction, and unnecessary incarceration; and

- To reduce the harm to our earth now caused by the practice of destroying crops intended for the production of drugs.

ALTERNATIVE POLICIES

Instead of the current war on drugs, we offer the following policies for study, debate, and implementation:

- Shift budget priorities from spending for pursuing, prosecuting, and imprisoning drug-law offenders to spending for education, treatment, and research.
- Develop and implement age-appropriate drug education programs that are grounded in research and fact and that promote dialogue without fear of censure or reprisal.
- Undertake research to assess the effects of currently illegal drugs. Ensure that findings and conclusions are publicly accessible, serving as a basis for responsible decision-making by individuals and in arenas of public policy and practice.
- Research the sociological factors that contribute to the likelihood of drug use becoming habitual, addictive, and destructive, such as poverty, poor mental health, sexual or other physical abuse, and lack of education or medical treatment.
- Research and expand a range of management and on-demand treatment programs for drug abuse and addiction. Examples include nutritional counseling, job training, psychiatric evaluation and treatment, psychological counseling, parent training and assistance, support groups, clean needle distribution and exchange, substitution of safer drugs (e.g. methadone or marijuana), medically administered drug maintenance, disease screening, and acupuncture and other alternative and complementary treatments. Publish the results of studies of these programs.
- Require health insurance providers to cover in-patient and out-patient treatment for substance abuse on the same basis as other chronic health conditions.
- Make all drugs legally available with a prescription by a licensed physician, subject to professional oversight. End the practice of punishing an individual for obtaining, possessing, or using an otherwise illegal substance to treat a medical condition. End the threat to impose sanctions on physicians who treat patients with opiates for alleviation of pain.
- Prohibit civil liberties violations and other intrusive law enforcement practices. Violations of the right to privacy such as urine testing should be imposed only upon employees in safety-sensitive occupations.
- Establish a legal, regulated, and taxed market for marijuana. Treat marijuana as we treat alcohol.
- Modify civil forfeiture laws to require conviction before seizure of assets. Prohibit the eviction of family, friends, and co-habitants or the loss of government entitlements.
- Abolish mandatory minimum prison sentences for the use and distribution of currently illicit drugs. Legislation should specify only maximum prison sentences.

- Remove criminal penalties for possession and use of currently illegal drugs, with drug abusers subject to arrest and imprisonment only if they commit an actual crime (e.g., assault, burglary, impaired driving, vandalism). End sentencing inequities driven by racial profiling.
- Establish and make more accessible prison-based drug treatment, education, job training, and transition programs designed for inmates.
- End the financing of anti-drug campaigns in Central and South America, campaigns that include the widespread spraying of herbicides, contribute to the destruction of rainforests, and are responsible for uprooting peoples from their homelands.

OUR CALL TO ACT AS A PEOPLE OF FAITH

We must begin with ourselves. Our congregations can offer safe space for open and honest discussion among congregants about the complex issues of drug use, abuse, and addiction. Through acceptance of one another and encouragement of spiritual growth, we should be able to acknowledge and address our own drug use without fear of censure or reprisal.

We can recognize that drugs include not only currently illegal substances but also alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, over-the-counter pain relievers, and prescription drugs. We can learn to distinguish among use, abuse, and addiction. We can support one another in recognizing drug-related problems and seeking help. We can seek to understand those among us who use drugs for relief or escape. With compassion, we can cultivate reflection and analysis of drug policy. In the safe space of our own congregations, we can begin to prevent destructive relationships with drugs. We can lend necessary support to individuals and families when a loved one needs treatment for an addiction problem. We can encourage our congregations to partner with and follow the lead of groups representing individuals whose lives are most severely undermined by current drug policy—people of color and of low income. We can learn from health care professionals what unique patterns of substance abuse exist in our local areas. We can go beyond our walls and bring our perspective to the interfaith community, other nonprofit organizations, and elected officials.

Our Unitarian Universalist history calls us to pursue a more just world. Our faith compels us to hold our leaders accountable for their policies. In calling for alternatives to the war on drugs, we are mindful of its victims. Drug use should be addressed solely as a public health problem, not as a criminal justice issue. Dependence upon any illegal drugs or inappropriate use of legal drugs may point to deep, unmet human needs. We have a moral obligation to advocate compassionate, harm-reducing policy. We believe that our nations have the imagination and capability to address effectively the complex issues of the demand for drugs, both legal and illegal.

We reaffirm the spirit of our social witness positions taken on drugs in resolutions adopted from 1965 to 1991. Recognizing the right of conscience for all who differ, we denounce the war on drugs and recommend alternative goals and policies. Let not fear or any other barrier prevent us from advocating a more just, compassionate world.