Plan a Solitary Confinement Prayer Vigil and Solidarity Action in your Congregation’s Parking Lot – January 21, 2022

What is a Solitary Prayer Vigil and Solidarity Action? The Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy’s (VICPP’s) Prayer Vigil and #SolitarySolidarity Action gives participants and viewers a quick visual sense of what it is like to live in a solitary cell and highlights the need for Virginia to reduce its use of solitary confinement.

Why January 21, 2022? This is the last day of VICPP’s Days for All People Advocacy week. Although most of the week’s sessions will be virtual, this action is outdoors and in communities around the Commonwealth.

What are the purposes of the Vigil and #SolitarySolidarity Action? The prayer vigil and action are designed to:

- Help people understand how awful solitary confinement is for people.
- Offer advocacy opportunities accompanying the “experience.”
- Generate media coverage about the need to abolish the use of solitary confinement.

What happens? You set up a mock cell situation and ask people to sit inside it, or imagine being in it, for a few minutes. A typical solitary confinement cell is 6’ x 10’. A parking space in your congregation’s parking lot is the perfect size. Set up a cot (if easily available), a chair, and a bucket to simulate a toilet.

Walls: Walls can be simple or more elaborate. Parking cones or masking tape can mark the edges, or you could build something simple with office dividers. Use your creativity to design the walls of the cell but keep it simple.

Sounds: You can play the sounds a prisoner might hear from this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2Pg2HAvnAE

Virtual: Some groups have arranged for folks to wear virtual glasses that allow them to see the inside of a solitary confinement cell. Virtual glasses into which cell phones are inserted that download the sounds and views can be purchased for approximately $25. This is completely optional and not required.

How long should it last? The action and vigil should be short – approximately 30 minutes. This includes time for advocacy.

Generate media about the #SolitarySolidarity Action. Media helps the message reach more people. VICPP will publicize your vigil/action in the mainstream media, but you can help:

- Let VICPP Communications Director Ayesha Gilani Taylor know about your planned vigil/event by emailing her at: AyeshaGT@virginiainterfaithcenter.org
- Take photos of your event and send to Ayesha and post on your social media with this hashtag: #SolitarySolidarity
- Ask each participant to post on social media with the hashtag #SolitarySolidarity and include a link to the online petition, which is: tinyurl.com/nosolitary
- Give a short report about the action/vigil in your congregation’s bulletin or newsletter. Again, link to the online petition, which is: tinyurl.com/nosolitary
Remembering Those Incarcerated: An End to Solitary Confinement Litany

As people gather, ask people to remain silent and to individually take turns sitting (or standing) in the cell. Ask them to imagine being in the space for weeks or months with little to no human contact. Start within a few minutes of the scheduled starting time.

Leader: We, residents of the nation’s oldest Commonwealth, gather together this Friday morning, January 21st, to join with others around the Commonwealth in advocating an end to the excessive use of solitary confinement in Virginia. We have witnessed the failure of our justice system and the inhumane treatment of our neighbors.

All: Forgive us, we pray.

Leader: Some of us heard this week during the VICPP plenary on criminal justice reform from people who had been in solitary confinement for long periods of time.

All: Our hearts were broken to hear the stories of our fellow human beings tortured by excessive use of solitary confinement – right here in Virginia.

Leader: Our shared faith traditions urge us to love our neighbor as ourselves,

All: And to visit those who are sick or in prison.

Leader: We want our neighbors who are incarcerated to be treated as we would want to be treated,

All: With respect and dignity.

Leader: According to the United Nations (UN), keeping someone for more than 15 days in solitary confinement is torture. The UN Rules, referred to as the Mandela Rules, define solitary confinement as the “confinement of prisoners for 22 hours or more a day without meaningful human contact.” The rules then say that “prolonged” solitary confinement – more than 15 consecutive days – is a form of torture.

All: Using these definitions, Virginia tortures hundreds, possibly thousands of people a year.
Leader: But the Virginia Department of Corrections claims it does not use solitary confinement, it uses “restrictive housing.” Unfortunately, it is the same thing.

All: We do not care what it is called. Isolating people for long periods of time is torture.

Leader: In the era of COVID-19, many of us have had small experiences with isolation. As a society, we are seeing incredible mental health challenges as a result, particularly for those who live alone.

All: And few of us live in a cell the size of this parking spot. We have cell phones. We have computers.

Leader: Let’s take a minute to reflect on living in this parking spot, with no human contact, no cell phones, and no computers for days or weeks, or even months. Take a minute and stand in the parking spot for a minute. Close your eyes. Imagine being there alone. (PAUSE FOR A FEW MINUTES.)

Leader: We know that managing a prison is challenging work. Many of the guards have inadequate training and low wages. Many of those incarcerated are there because of substance abuse and mental health challenges.

All: And yet torturing people who are incarcerated makes prisons more dangerous and exacerbates mental health problems.

Leader: And we are ashamed by the mass incarceration of people of color and the disparate treatment of people without family wealth.

All: Those in our prisons are disproportionately people of color. Those who are tortured by solitary confinement are also disproportionately people of color.

Leader: Prisons in America and our so-called criminal justice system are focused on punishment.

All: Our faith calls us to focus on repentance and restoration. Justice is restoring us to one another.

Leader: The Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy is advocating reforms that will limit the use of solitary confinement (“restrictive housing”) in Virginia. The common-sense proposal is based on bills passed in other states that have reduced violence in the prisons and saved states money. Will you join me in supporting a bi-partisan bill to reduce the use of torture in Virginia’s prisons?

All: Yes, tell me more.
Leader: OK. Take out your phone. (PAUSE.) Go to: tinyurl.com/nosolitary (PAUSE.) Send your delegate and senator a message urging them to support bills to limit the use of solitary confinement in Virginia. When the info comes up, type in your name and address. (PAUSE.) You should see two legislators’ names. Click on both of them. (PAUSE.) Now, review the email. Feel free to edit it. Once you are done reading and/or editing the letter, click “send.” Let me know if you are having any problems and we’ll get someone to help. (PAUSE. WAIT TILL MOST FOLKS HAVE FINISHED.)

Leader: Thank you for your advocacy.

All: Thank you for the opportunity to make a difference.

Leader: We do this work for the more than 7,000 people incarcerated in Virginia prisons who were placed in solitary confinement units known as “restrictive housing” at some point during the year, and the hundreds currently suffering. Let us now take a few minutes as we close to ask for God’s blessing for those incarcerated, our advocacy, and our Commonwealth.

All: Eternal Spirit, we ask Your special blessing and healing on those who are incarcerated and tortured in Virginia’s prisons.

Leader: For those who have endured like Tyquine Lee and bear the scars of bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder because of abuse, manic depression, and schizophrenia amid other mental illnesses, remind them of Your presence.

All: We beseech You, Eternal Spirit.

Leader: As people of faith and goodwill, help us be advocates for Your people – to stand with those incarcerated, relegated to isolation and torture, and too often forgotten.

All: Lord, have mercy upon them.

Leader: Holy God, we see those in solitary confinement as our brothers and sisters needing our earnest prayers. May our cries and pleas spiritually loosen the chains of their bondage.

All: Lord, hear our cries.

Leader: Hebrews 13:3 admonishes us to, “Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated.”

All: We stand committed to freeing our neighbors from the barbaric practice of solitary confinement.

Leader: We give thanks for each person gathered here today – for their passion and concern, for their love of neighbor.

All: Holy One, grant us strength and courage. Amen.