

Alternatives to the War on Drugs

DRAFT

Statement of Conscience

Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations

Background: This 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 issue 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. This initial draft Statement of Conscience is being distributed to all congregations and districts for their reflection and feedback. Comments must be received by the CSW by March 1, 2002. The CSW will determine whether there is sufficient consensus among the commenters for the CSW to prepare a revised draft. The revised draft will be placed on the final agenda of the June 2002 General Assembly. A mini-assembly will be held at that time to receive proposed amendments. After final revision by the CSW, the draft Statement of Conscience will be debated by the General Assembly. A two-thirds vote is required for passage. **An addendum containing background facts about the war on drugs follows the draft Statement of Conscience.** Information on how to submit comments on this draft and text of other UUA Statements of Conscience can be found at the CSW website (www.uua.org/csw).

OUR CALL TO ADDRESS 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 policy has failed. The costs of our current drug policy are the breakdown of families and neighborhoods, widespread violation of civil liberties, escalated incarceration, political corruption, and the imposition of U.S. policy abroad. Moreover, the drug war disproportionately targets individuals and communities of color and poverty-stricken individuals and communities. It is time to speak the truth. It is time to explore alternative approaches and to end this costly war.

The war on drugs casts all drug users as drug abusers. “Drug use” has come to mean drug abuse, behavior that is out of control, harmful to others, and reaching epidemic proportions. Drug use is portrayed as threatening to society as a whole and closed to study, discussion, and alternatives. Yet, drug users include all who use drugs, legal and illegal, drugs such as caffeine, nicotine, alcohol, and other over-the-counter sedatives and stimulants, as well as drugs such as marijuana, heroin, and cocaine.

As Unitarian Universalists committed to a free and responsible search for truth, we must condemn the untruths and 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. The 1936 propaganda film “Reefer Madness” misled generations of audiences about the dangers of marijuana. D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education), the leading program for school children, misleads its participants. It teaches that all illicit drugs are equally harmful even in the face of current scientific research. United States government drug policy-makers have misled the world about the purported success of the war on drugs. They lead us to believe that success is just around the corner if just one more law restricting constitutional protections is enacted or another billion dollars is allocated for drug enforcement efforts. 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 condemn this war on drugs. We call for thoughtful consideration and careful implementation of alternatives that regard the reduction of harm as the appropriate standard by which to test 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 maintaining 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 and on native people's lands to stop the production of drugs.

As a community of faith, Unitarian Universalists have both a prophetic 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 the purported facts, we are compelled to consider a different approach to national drug policy.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

We can 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 consider 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 of us who use drugs for relief or escape. With compassion, we can cultivate reflection and analysis that can inform ongoing assessment 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 non-punitive intervention for an addiction problem.

In order to conceive of a more just 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 is a vice or a sin, or that it 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 incite crime. Legal prohibition of drugs leads to inflated street value, which in turn incites violent turf wars among distributors. A small minority of addicts pays for their drug habits by committing violent and non-violent crimes against people and property. 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 a “drug-free America” is a fantasy. “Just Say No” is not a viable policy despite its good intentions. The cost of waging a war with the goal of a drug-free America is cruel and counterproductive. We believe that the well being of drug users, abusers, and addicts is tied to the health and well being of our families and our communities, our societal fabric and our international affairs. Alternatives exist.

ALTERNATIVE GOALS

Based on this perspective, we believe appropriate and achievable goals include:

- Reducing and ultimately eliminating violent and predatory drug-related crime
- Preventing or at least delaying or reducing consumption of drugs harmful to health among children and adolescents
- Reducing the likelihood that drug users will become drug abusers
- Increasing the accessibility of treatment for drug abusers and eliminating the stigma associated with accessing such treatment
- Minimizing the harmful effects of drug use for an abuser or an addict, such as overdosing and disease contracted from the use of contaminated needles
- Minimizing the harmful consequences of current drug policy, such as civil liberties violations, racial profiling, and over-long incarceration

ALTERNATIVE POLICIES

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

- Remove criminal penalties for obtaining and using drugs, with drug abusers subject to arrest and imprisonment only if they harm others, and then only for the actual crime committed (e.g., assault, burglary, impaired driving, etc.).
- Establish a legal, regulated market for marijuana.
- Abolish “mandatory minimum” prison sentences for the use and distribution of currently illicit drugs. Legislation should specify only maximum prison sentences, with such sentences rendered by judges and juries with judicial discretion, not by public prosecutors.
- Abolish “civil forfeiture” laws, which currently permit law enforcement agents to seize and keep a person’s property, even without a conviction.
- Eliminate civil liberties violations and other intrusive law enforcement practices. Privacy violations such as urine testing should be imposed only upon employees in safety-sensitive occupations and upon others only for good reason.
- Reverse budget priorities between spending for pursuing, prosecuting, and imprisoning drug-law offenders and spending for education, treatment and research.

- Establish and make accessible prison-based drug treatment and education programs for inmates who have committed violent offenses.
- Establish, research, and publish the results of a range of treatment programs for drug abuse and addiction. Programs can include needle distribution, nutritional counseling, job training, psychological counseling, substitution of safer drugs (e.g., methadone or marijuana), parent training and assistance, support groups, and disease screening.
- 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.
- Abolish all risk of arrest or any other punishment for an individual obtaining, possessing, or using an otherwise illegal substance to treat a medical condition if so advised by a licensed physician who has determined that the benefits outweigh the risks.
- Undertake extensive research to assess and quantify the positive, negative, and indeterminate effects of all 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.

Our Unitarian Universalist history calls us to pursue a more just world. Our faith compels us to hold our leaders accountable by speaking truth to power. In calling for an end to the war on drugs, we are mindful of its victims. Addiction is a disease, not a crime. Dependence upon any illegal drug or inappropriate use of legal drugs points to deep human needs unmet. We have a moral obligation to advocate compassionate, harm-reducing policy. We believe that our nation has the imagination and capability to do better in addressing the complex issues around the demand for drugs, both illegal and legal.

We reaffirm 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. Let not fear or any other barrier prevent us from advocating a more just, compassionate world.