

# Prison Ecology

Unitarian Universalist Church In The Pines

January 7, 2018

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On the 17<sup>th</sup> of November, 2016, [www.grist.org](http://www.grist.org) published an article, entitled ***Florida to Rebuild Jail on Land Prone to Flooding***: The article read as follows:

“When it comes to climate change in the United States, Florida is first in line, being more at risk for damage from flooding due to climate change than any other state. In fact, the state is already starting to be affected by rising sea levels.

Which is why you should file this under this-will-not-end-well news.

Despite a massive flood brought by heavy rains last year that triggered a natural gas explosion at Escambia County Jail in Pensacola, Fla., that County’s Board of Commissioners recently decided to keep the jail in the same location instead of relocating.

On April 29, 2015, torrential downpours and flooding hit new records in Florida. Within 24 hours, Pensacola had received 20 inches of rain. It was Escambia County’s worst flood in 30 years. For those working and incarcerated in the county jail, the flooding was deadly. In the late hours of the following day, April 30, a natural gas explosion at the jail left two people dead and nearly 200 injured. (The jail detained about 600 inmates at that time.) The explosion occurred after torrential rains flooded the basement and left the jail without electricity.

Both inmates and guards had complained about the smell of gas to jail supervisors, but no one ever contacted the natural gas provider. The explosion – which destroyed most of the building, including parts of the jail – occurred around 11 pm on that night.

As you could imagine, the explosion left the people incarcerated (many of whom had not been convicted of a crime) and their family members traumatized. And it was not the first issue with flooding at the jail. In 2012, a similar incident occurred when a torrential rainstorm flooded most of the jail’s basement, resulting in substantial damage and the County needing to construct parts of the jail. A year ago, the Grand Jury recommended that the County relocate the jail elsewhere because of the recent history of the location. It would’ve been a smart decision – seeing that this location is prone to serious flooding (in part thanks to climate change).

But last week, when Escambia County was supposed to choose between three new locations for the jail, they decided to keep the same location and simply rebuild it there. Why would they do that? Well, during the public comment period, several (mainly small) business owners from the area testified that they did not want the jail moved and that the jail’s location was important for their business interests. But perhaps the safety concerns about keeping the jail in a location prone to flooding should also be important? The Board of Commissioners did discuss mitigating the effects of flooding as part of rebuilding the jail and came up with no answers.

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Granted, not all of the other locations were perfect. One proposed location was a Superfund site, and many had questioned whether it would be safe to build a jail there. "It's changing the land use the remedy was designed for ... when they did the cleanup [on the superfund site], they did it for industrial use based on an eight-hour standard ... people should not be allowed to live there 24 hours," testified a chemist who advised local group, Citizens Against Toxic Exposure.

Still, it doesn't seem smart to rebuild a jail at a location that has had the same problem over and over again – a problem that has turned deadly. As the Human Rights Defense Center and Prison Ecology wrote to the Board, the jail's location is undoubtedly a question of environmental justice: "To subject individuals caught up in the criminal justice system to heightened risks of adverse health impacts presents an environmental justice problem for this facility, being that incarceration has been found to consistently impact low-income communities and people of color disproportionately in every state of the country."

Florida is not alone in this situation. The United States incarcerates 716 out of every 100,000 people – more than any other nation – and our prisons are a continual source of environmental degradation. In California, at least 8 of 33 state prisons have been cited for water pollution problems over the past 15 years. In Washington State, the LEED-certified Monroe Correctional Complex has been dumping raw sewage into public waterways for more than 25 years.

Believing that in some ways, a prison is a factory farm for humans, Prison Ecology – a non-profit organization – was founded in 2015. It hopes to focus attention on the environmental impacts of the nation's booming prison economy. Yet, they have found that when they try to interest environmental groups in the subject, they are often greeted with blank stares. "The first reaction is to be a bit dismissive, like, 'There are lots of things to fight, and this isn't on our radar.'"

"But," says Paul Wright, their founder and executive director, "if you start looking at criminal justice through an environmental lens, a whole new world opens up."

In 2013, the Bureau of Justice Statistics recorded 2.3 million incarcerated Americans. Yet the 5,000 jails and prisons that hold them are frequently situated in remote and impoverished areas and inhabited by people whose free speech rights are sharply curtailed, so they operate far from the public view. Also hidden are the effects of prison pollution on the inmates themselves.

The EPA defines environmental justice as "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies." The

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problem is that the Federal Bureau of Prisons has never truly taken the overrepresentation of African American and Hispanic neighborhoods – or what we call front-line communities – into account when assessing environmental justice impacts of new or rebuilt prisons as part of an environmental impact statement. If it had done so, many of the existing facilities might never have been built.

If you look at criminal justice through an environmental lens, a whole new world opens up, exposing the number of facilities adjacent to massive coal ash dumps containing toxics such as mercury, lead, arsenic, hexavalent chromium, cadmium, and thallium, or those built on landfills that still belch foul-smelling methane gas into cells. In Washington State, the Northwest Detention Center is next to a federal Superfund site, the Tacoma Tar Pits. In Colorado, nine state and four federal prisons are located in a region where the water table has been contaminated by high concentrations of trichloroethylene from an abandoned uranium mill.

Inmates in many of these facilities report health problems consistent with toxic exposure. But their options are limited. "They can't say, 'Hey, I don't like it here, so I'm going to move. In a prison, you have no choice."

Last summer, the Prison Ecology Project submitted a letter to Charles Lee, the EPA's Deputy Associate Administrator for Environmental Justice, asking the federal government to consider prison populations in its environmental justice assessments. Ninety-three other environmental and social justice organizations signed on, indicating that awareness is beginning to spread.

But, it has yet to reach the Bureau of Prisons.

"In the environmental community, people tend to see the government as the solution," Wright says. "But it's the government that's building these facilities. It's the government that puts people there at gunpoint. And it's the government that's ignoring toxic impacts."

And where do Unitarian Universalists stand? How do we respond to greater numbers of people incarcerated for longer times in poorer facilities atop environmental time-bombs? And this in a culture that largely exhibits no concern whatsoever for prison populations.

Well, as Bryan Stevenson, the Head of **Equal Justice Initiative**, an organization committed to protecting basic human rights for the most vulnerable people in American society, said in last year's General Assembly Ware Lecture, we need to "stay woke" to what is happening in our prison system in terms of those who are there and the conditions under which they live, much of which is directly affected by ever-growing percentages of privately-managed facilities – places run with the profit motive as the prime directive.

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To engage in this work, we are called to our first, second and sixth principles:

- ***The inherent worth and dignity of every person***
- ***Justice, equity and compassion in human relations***
- ***The goal of world community, with peace, liberty and justice for all.***

Grounded in this spirituality of harnessing love's power to combat oppression, I believe we are called to demonstrate our willingness to build collective power through inclusive coalitions with organizations such as Prison Ecology, and engagement in political advocacy, adding our spiritual power and faith to this movement. I am sure that most of us – if not all – have either seen the yellow tee shirts or heard the phrase ***“Standing on the Side of Love.”*** This is our Association's ***“...public advocacy campaign seeking to harness love's power to stop oppression.”*** It is time we learned to embody and live this campaign, to work towards a more humane, more just legal system.

No, this is not an easy call. And no, it will not be answered in a week, a month, a year – or maybe even within our lifetimes. Much of the universe of public opinion that surrounds our penal systems is generally a dark and threatening storm – ***“They're criminals! They should be punished!”*** But we urge ourselves to live above and beyond the darkness, to call our world to live more justly, more lovingly.

What tools do we have? Well, consider the work of our own Church of the Larger Fellowship (or, CLF), which seeks to create communicative relationships between those of us who are free and prisoners seeking spiritual support, or more activist organizations such as ***Black and Pink***, an open family of LGBTQ prisoners and “free world” allies who support each other in work seeking to bring an end to the prison industrial complex. And then there is ***Partners in Health***, whose mission statement – ***We go. We make house calls. We build health systems. We stay*** – has included providing low-cost, environmentally-related, approaches for pre-tuberculosis cases in dank prison systems from Africa to Russia, and continues to work on improvements and better cost-efficiencies for this work to this day.

As the Rev. Karen Brammer put it, “Environmental Justice is not being the benefactor or the expert. It is getting out of our comfort zones and becoming up close and personal with those in a state of need.” It is turning our Principles from words to deeds. It is living our faith and extending the hand of love to all.

In an atmosphere of hope and love, may it be so. Amen and blessed be.