



WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
JUSTICE AND WITNESS MINISTRIES

700 Prospect Ave.
Cleveland, OH 44115-1110
Phone: 216.736.3700
Fax: 216.736.3703

NaKeisha Sylver-Blount
UCC/NCC Joint Washington Advocacy Officer

Witness for Justice #535

July 4, 2011

This War is Not Our Friend

NaKeisha Sylver-Blount

I have fond childhood memories of Officer Friendly. “Officer Friendly” was the persona local police officers assumed during fun, educational visits to our schools. The program’s goal was to build a positive and respectful view of law enforcement officials among students, their teachers and parents. This strategy worked well in my middle class elementary school during the 1980s. We eagerly awaited visits, and were always sorry to see our “friend” leave. When I would march up to unsuspecting officers in supermarkets and banks with a gleeful “Hi, Officer Friendly,” they were always kind enough to play along.

My hometown continues to invest in the program, because it underscores a simple reality—the way people perceive law enforcement makes a difference for all our safety. In a 1997 *Northwestern University Law Review* article, professors Paul H. Robinson and John M. Darley outline three important factors to maintaining a criminal justice system’s credibility. The system must: (1) punish those who deserve punishment, under rules seen as just; (2) protect those from punishment who do not deserve punishment, and (3) impose appropriate levels of punishment (not more or less) where punishment is deserved.

In several ways, our criminal justice system fails this test. Take for instance the much-hyped “War on Drugs.” June 17, 2011 marked forty years since President Richard Nixon first used the militaristic phrase to describe the set of U.S. policies aimed at discouraging the production, distribution and consumption of illegal psychoactive drugs. Beginning in the 1980s, the war escalated to new heights. Due largely to changes in political and law enforcement policy, the number of people incarcerated on drug offenses rose by a whopping 1,100% (from just over 41,000 to nearly half a million) in less than 15 years. There were 37 million drug arrests from 1970 to 2008 – 31 million of which occurred after 1980. Shockingly, while black and brown people are statistically no more likely than whites to use drugs, three-fourths of all incarcerated on drug offenses are people of color.

As the U.S. Sentencing Commission noted in 2002, a “perceived improper racial disparity fosters disrespect for and a lack of confidence in the criminal justice system among those very groups that Congress intended would benefit from the heightened penalties.” Further, the May 2011 Supreme Court decision ruling California’s overstuffed prisons unconstitutional demonstrates how expensive and unsustainable our harshly punitive approach to some forms of drug abuse has become.

No wonder then that numerous law enforcement officers are now helping to lead the charge toward more responsible and equitable drug policy. They and the vast majority of their colleagues entered their profession to help *all* their neighbors, including those current policies that force them to incarcerate at alarming rates. We should all push our legislators to enact criminal justice policies that are just and effective, not just those that make for catchy election-year sound bites.

The drug problem is one we have been warring for decades now, succeeding only in making our nation the world’s top incarcerator. Maybe we can finally acknowledge the need for more people-friendly solutions, for the good of us all.

The United Church of Christ has more than 5,300 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenantal relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.