

NEW YORK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

...continuing The Biblical Seminary in New York

April 6, 2020

Dear Governor Cuomo:

I want to thank you personally for your leadership and your support of all religious institutions as we work towards a more just society and a more equitable New York. You and your staff have been strong supporters of New York Theological Seminary's master program in Sing Sing Correctional Facility. Your executive pardon of one of our students, Mr. Tyron Abrams literally saved his life. For that, we are forever grateful.

I am attaching a letter signed by over 50 faith leaders in the State of New York. We urge you to consider commuting the sentences of elderly state prisoners and those with underlying health conditions. We implore you to take this act of mercy before COVID-19 becomes a pandemic within the prison system. We specifically ask that you consider at-risk prisoners who have exemplary disciplinary records, have families and supporters who can house them, and can continue to serve their sentence under home confinement.

It would be tremendously significant to carry out this act of grace during Holy Week/Passover. As believers of the Judeo-Christian tradition, this week will culminate in the celebration of God's mercy and new life. Your action will help us celebrate with the most vulnerable prisoners.

Governor Cuomo, no one understands the urgency of this request better than you. Our state and our nation are under a state of emergency and we must act quickly to save lives. The potential spread of COVID19 in our prison systems would be tragic for the prisoners and those called to serve in the prison system. For the sake of public safety and as a model of human compassion, please consider this request.

Gratefully yours,



Rev. Tony Tian-Ren Lin, Ph.D.
Vice President of Institutional Advancement and Research

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April 6, 2020

Hon. Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor of New York State
NYS Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo:

As faith leaders in the State of New York, we were heartened to see [your remarks at your March 23 press conference](#) indicating that you are seriously considering granting emergency clemencies to elderly and other high-risk New York citizens incarcerated in our state correctional facilities.

You have demonstrated strong, compassionate leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. We are now calling on you to continue that outstanding leadership – and set a model for other Governors who will soon face a similar moral and public health imperative in their states -- ***by commuting the sentences of elderly state prisoners and others with underlying health conditions that put them most at risk of death when the virus spreads through New York State prisons.***

According to a 2018 New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision [report](#) (“DOCCS”), as of January 1, 2018, there were 10,239 men and women in state custody aged 50 and older; 2,615 of these individuals were over the age of 60.

A substantial percentage of these incarcerated seniors have already served decades in prison. Attorneys with the City University of New York (CUNY) Law School who are familiar with the clemency process and have analyzed DOCCS’s data conservatively estimate that there are several hundred New Yorkers in state prison who are 60 and over and who have already served at least two decades or longer in prison. And there are approximately 100 incarcerated people who are over 70 and have already served three decades or more of their sentences.

As you know, the CDC has advised that people over 60 are at heightened risk of death or serious illness from the virus. Due to the decreased life expectancy of incarcerated individuals (on average, people in prison who die of "natural causes" are just 57 years old, as opposed to an average of age 80 for all New Yorkers), incarcerated citizens over 50 are undoubtedly at exceptionally high risk for fatality from COVID-19 as well.

Many seniors in prison already have compromised immune systems or histories of respiratory infections, heart disease, and other conditions that put them at even greater risk of grave illness or death if infected with the virus. Many lack access to hand sanitizer, soap, and other critical barriers against virus transmission.

Moreover, prison requires people to live in close quarters. Even older and ill prisoners who are attempting to self-segregate themselves for safety must still come in close contact with guards

and other inmates as they shower, use the bathroom, comply with security checks, and go to the infirmary for medication and the commissary for food.

There are many aging and medically at-risk prisoners who have exemplary disciplinary records, have families and other supporters who can house them as soon as they are released, and can continue to be under home confinement while the State of Emergency is in effect. The humane and wise course of action is to allow their loved ones to house and care for them now, before they become gravely ill in prison or are hospitalized.

Before the beginning of the pandemic, many older and ill prisoners submitted clemency petitions to the Governor's Office. ***We ask that you begin by immediately ordering the release of a substantial number of individuals with pending clemency applications.*** We would then ask that you direct your staff to review additional commutations for all older and at-risk prisoners, on a rolling and expedited basis.

The cost of inaction is high, ***including for the general public.*** If these older and ill prisoners are kept inside the prison and they become infected with the COVID-19 virus, New York will be obligated to hospitalize them. It makes much more sense to allow these individuals to be released to the care of their loved ones ***so that ICU beds and ventilators could be used by people in the free world who are unable to self-isolate because they are serving essential functions, including hospital workers, police officers, teachers, and others.***

We urge you to take immediate and bold action -- in the name of both compassion and public safety -- during this unprecedented crisis.

Sincerely,

Rev. Wendy Calderon-Payne, BronxConnect, NY

Sister Doreen Glynn, Srs. of St. Joseph of Carondelet, Latham, NY

Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Quick, First United Methodist Church, Gouverneur, NY

Rabbi Barat Ellman, Ph.D., Brooklyn, NY

Pastor Patrick Dupont, St. Joseph's House of Hospitality, Rochester, NY

Rev. Vivian Ruth Waltz, Hamburg United Methodist Church, Hamburg, NY

Sister Susan Wilcox, Justice, Peace Integrity of Creation Coordinator for the Sisters of St. Joseph, Brentwood NY

Rev. Dr. Richard S. Gilbert, President, Interfaith Impact of New York State

Rev. Daiken Nelson, Sensei, Pamsula Zen Center, NYC

Rev. Dr. Cris H. Mogenson, Windsor, NY

Rabbi William Plevan, New York, NY

Rev. Dr. Allison Moore, St. Andrew's, New Paltz

Rev. Elizabeth G. Maxwell, Church of the Ascension, NYC

Rabbi Jill Jacobs, T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights

Rabbi Rachel Timoner, Congregation Beth Elohim, Brooklyn, NY

Rev. Dr. John W. McNeill, Retired United Methodist Pastor, Fairport NY

Rev. Posey Krakowsky Church of the Ascension NYC

Rev. Beth DuBois, South Valley Presbyterian Church, Syracuse, NY

Howard W. Henry, Jr., Elder, University Presbyterian Church, Buffalo, NY

Rabbi Suzanne Singer, Temple Beth El, Riverside, CA (grandmother: Rose M. Singer, longtime member, NY Board of Correction)

Rabbi Jonah Geffen, Hunter College Hillel, New York City, NY

Rev. Clyde Kuemmerle, Ph.D., Executive Director, Ecclesia Ministries of New York

Rev. Merle Showers, University United Methodist Church, Buffalo, NY

Rabbi Rachel Kahn-Troster, T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights

Rev. Kimberly P Chastain, United Presbyterian Church, Binghamton, NY

Rev. Joseph Papparone, Labor-Religion Coalition of NYS, Albany, NY

Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, New York, NY

Rev Dele, UCC, New Paltz NY

Chaplain Kim Eliano, CAIC Campaign for alternatives to solitary confinement

Rev. Emily McNeill, Executive Director, Labor-Religion Coalition of NYS, Co-chair NYS Poor People's Campaign

Rev. Sharon White-Harrigan, New Jerusalem Church

Rev. Emily Otto, United Church of Christ

Sister Janet Korn, RSM, Sisters of Mercy, Rochester, NY

Rev. Tony Lin, Ph.D.. Vice President of Institutional Advancement and Research, New York Theological Seminary

Rev. Stephen Phelps, Presbytery of NYC (Hon. Ret.)

Rev. Sarah McTyre, Park Central Presbyterian Church, Syracuse, NY

Minister Vanee Sykes, Dream Deferred

Rabbi Michael Feinberg, Executive Director, Greater New York Labor- Religion Coalition, NYC

Rev. Dr. M. Bruce McKay, Retired UCC Pastor, Buffalo, NY

Rev. Dr. Cris H. Mogenson, Windsor, NY

Rev. Dr. Robert Brashear, Presbytery of NYC (Honorably Retired)

Rev. Dr. Noel D. Vanek, Community Church of the Pelhams UCC, Pelham, NY

Rabbi Guy Austrian, Fort Tryon Jewish Center, New York NY

Rabbi Drorah Setel, Temple Emanu-El, Rochester, NY

Rev. Mark Chaffin, Troy, NY

Rev. Samantha E. Lioi, Allegheny Mennonite Conference, Buffalo, NY

Rabbi Charles Feinberg, Interfaith Action for Human Rights