

RIM DIRECTOR, REV. SHARON STANLEY-REA, SPEAKS AGAINST FAMILY SEPARATION, DETENTION, AND ZERO TOLERANCE POLICIES

National Press Club, Launch of “All Rights for All—Without Borders” Statement from Religion Scholars and Faith Leaders

In our first week of the official beginning of summer, we remember what summer is SUPPOSED to be good for. It is supposed to be a good time to go camping. To finally feel warm! Maybe to try out your new tent at a campground. To have a picnic with family by a grill. To travel and see a new place. And to make new friends.

But the HEAT in the summer is NOT supposed to come from criticism—spoken over microphones or tweeted en route to playing golf--that dares to call those who have endured a treacherous journey to escape life threatening violence CRIMINALS just for seeking safety! The TYPE OF TENT to be enjoyed in the summer is NOT to be a tent city in Tornillo, Texas or on military bases filled with children who’ve been torn from the arms of their parents! THE TRAVEL of families in the summer was never intended to be in immigration busses that put a father in one place, a mother in another, and children in locations where they don’t even know! The NEW PEOPLE you meet, the new friends you make, in the summer are NOT supposed to be those who are wrapped in mylar blankets beside you on a cold floor. And NO PICNIC is supposed to be served to a human being in a CAGE.

Rather, THIS IS A SEASON when our hearts, instead, must return to the strongest values of our faith and nation: compassion, love, hospitality, mercy, justice for all. Please hear us, as faith and community leaders clearly. Our interests are NOT PARTISAN! Indeed, in a March 26, 2015 letter to President Obama, faith leaders from across the country called for an end to family detention and the use of detention to deter families from seeking asylum, saying to President Obama then and TO the administration NOW—*“As faith leaders...we call on you to end the harsh policy of family detention and employ community based alternatives to detention. (because) We believe (family detention) to be inhumane and harmful to the physical, emotional, and mental well-being of this vulnerable population.”*

We said it then, and we say it now, because last week’s EO still has reunited only a small group of families, and instead, in a way far MORE restrictive than the

previous administration, violates US human rights and protection commitments by pushing those seeking protection into potential long term family detention.

Instead, we remind all communities who care—and WE DO CARE, MOST DEEPLY!—that the policy of Zero Tolerance falls tragically in line with a waterfall of assaults against children, which began in the first month of this presidency to target unaccompanied children in need of protection by labelling them as opportunistic and seeking to restrict their opportunity of due process to have their asylum claims fairly heard....then beginning publicly promising family separation at the border well OVER a year ago. We must remember that it was last summer that the DOJ ended a program that provided legal counsel for these children, and ICE began targeting their sponsors for deportation—and since then has imposed new hurdles to asylum, has issued memos that make courts less friendly, terminated the “Central American Minors” child refugee program, changed how it transferred children to ICE and more.

Faith communities ARE FULLY AWARE of this persistent onslaught against children, and therefore, like the small mustard seed that refuses to stop growing or to be kept in one place, SO OUR VOICES WILL CONTINUE TO GROW IN SUPPORT OF THE CHILDREN!

It is the depth of our concerns for families and children in crisis, pushed from their homelands, that has led us to sign on to today’s statement, and which last week likewise led my own denomination as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to author a letter called “Family Separations: A Word to the Church” (already signed by THOUSANDS across the country), reaffirming our commitment to love and hospitality to strangers, condemning the Zero Tolerance policy and practice of separating children from families, seeking to end family detention, and lifting up scripture’s attention getting reminder from Matthew 18:6 that “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.”

Therefore, in gratitude that the one we call Savior was not separated from his family during their refugee flight to escape the ruler Herod’s violence in Egypt, we uphold our primary commitment “to welcome and protect families facing separation due to detention or deportation.”

Instead of damaging family detention that traumatizes, that is against the Flores Settlement which wisely prohibits the detention of children for more than a few days, and ensures we use only practices “in the best interest of the child”, we strongly encourage due process in asylum claims, and alternatives to detention (of which many have been modelled through pilot programs in faith communities) which showed compliance rates of 96 to 97 percent, and were much less expensive than detention, which costs \$300 per day for an individual vs. \$38 per day for a family—costing far less than jail like detention centers, and breaking the profiting from incarceration of the “littlest ones” for whom Jesus himself said “let them come unto me” for “theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” THIS is the season to make new relationships thru immigrant partnerships, to travel to new places in our hearts and values, to make space at our tables for welcome!