

Open Letter from New Mexico Faith Leaders to our State Legislators
January 5, 2016

Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are mistreated and suffering, as though you felt their pain in your own body. -- Hebrews 13. 3

"Lord, when was it that we saw you in prison and visited you?" And the King will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these you did it to me." -- Matthew 25. 39-40

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone . . ." --Genesis 2. 18

As Faith Leaders from across New Mexico we urge our State Legislature to adopt humane and cost-effective methods of prison management in our state. This must include a dramatic reduction in the use of solitary confinement in all New Mexico correction facilities including county jails and detention centers, and the elimination of the use of solitary confinement with juveniles and the seriously mentally ill.

We believe that God created human beings with an inherent dignity to be respected at all times and in all places. We believe that the image of God, the human worth of every person, is nurtured, fulfilled and held accountable only in relationship, in human community. Therefore, we believe that prolonged isolation imposed on any person is inhumane, torturous, degrading to the human spirit, and contrary to the will of God.

Solitary confinement typically involves locking an inmate alone in a cell for 22 hours or more per day under conditions of extreme social isolation and forced idleness, and deprivation of virtually all meaningful environmental stimulation including restrictions on property, severe limitations on visitations and a total ban on group activities. In such instances, prisoners are usually confined to cells no bigger than the size of an ordinary parking space. Male and female detainees in "disciplinary segregation" range in age from juveniles to the elderly.

There is now broad consensus among mental health experts that deep psychological harm can result from solitary confinement. Numerous scientific clinical studies document the psychological and physiological suffering caused by such prolonged isolation: symptoms akin to delirium including hallucinations, perceptual distortions, heart palpitations, panic attacks, and suicidal ideation.

Research demonstrates that the clinical impacts of isolation can actually be similar to that of physical torture, and psychological effects caused by isolation may become irreversible especially among juveniles. The severe pain and suffering caused by solitary confinement is clearly documented throughout history in literary, scientific, and legal sources.

Solitary confinement also jeopardizes our public safety, and is extremely costly as well as fundamentally inhumane. The vast majority of those held in solitary confinement in New Mexico's prisons and jails will eventually return to society, many with higher levels of aggression and mental instability as a result of being confined in extreme forms of isolation. Prisoners deprived of normal human contact for extended periods find it extremely difficult to reintegrate into society, resulting in higher recidivism rates.

In recent decades, corrections systems have increasingly relied on solitary confinement as a prison management tool. In New Mexico, this practice has been both over-used and misused, resulting in costly litigation that wastes taxpayer dollars. As just one example, in 2012, a jury awarded former prisoner Stephen Slevin \$22 million after he was confined in a tiny padded cell in the Doña Ana County Detention Center for almost two years without a trial. On appeal, Slevin accepted 15.5 million.

The other group that suffers from this practice is prison staff who must interact daily with the inmates in this de-humanizing atmosphere. Doing so takes a psychological toll on staff, often resulting in their own declining mental health.

Solitary confinement is too often used as a first resort punishment for minor offenses and imposed arbitrarily and repeatedly. For example, a January 2013 site visit at the Grants Women's Correctional Facility by a team from the VERA Institute of Justice found that solitary confinement was more typically used for minor infractions, such as refusing directives or refusing to move, than for seriously injurious or life-threatening infractions, resulting in chronic overuse of segregation for women at the facility.

Wide spread use of solitary confinement in New Mexico has not resulted in a reduction of prison violence or inmate recidivism. Prisoners released from disciplinary segregation units directly to their communities at the end of their prison sentence are more likely to recommit crimes. The states of Colorado, Mississippi and Maine have enacted reforms that greatly reduced the use of solitary confinement in their prisons. Results have been positive for prison inmates, staff and the public. Levels of hostility, anger and violence declined, safety increased, and public expenditures were reduced. Maine Department of Corrections Commissioner, Joseph Ponte, explained:

"Over time, the more data we're pulling is showing that what we're doing now [through greatly reducing the use of solitary confinement] is safer than what we were doing before."

We call upon our elected leaders to reform the use of this damaging practice in our state. We acknowledge and commend the efforts already taken by the Department of Corrections following the 2011 Memorial passed by our State Legislature that drew attention to the need for a comprehensive evaluation of the use and impact of solitary confinement within our corrections facilities and on our communities.

We urge the State Legislature of New Mexico to continue efforts to implement systemic changes in all correction facilities in New Mexico that will result in a healthier and more humane atmosphere for prisoners and corrections staff, and protect our communities.

Please note: The congregations and organizations listed below are for identification purposes only. These names represent the position of individual faith leaders who have added their names in support.

Faithfully,

Rev. Dr. Holly Beaumont, Disciples of Christ, Organizing Director, Interfaith Worker Justice-NM, Santa Fe
Mary Ellen Gonzales, Leader, Social Justice Team, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
Rev. Liz McMaster (ret.) Unitarian Universalist, Albuquerque
George Huggins, Presbyterian Church US, Albuquerque
Ruth Hoffman, Director, Lutheran Advocacy Ministry-NM, (ELCA), Santa Fe
Rev. Karen D. Thompson, Retired Pastor, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, Santa Fe
Rev. William G. Thompson, Retired Pastor, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Santa Fe
Janet F McCormack, M.Ed. Zia United Methodist Church, Santa Fe
Rev. Jim Dunn, Santa Fe Vipassana Sangha, Santa Fe
Rev. William Harrold, Pastor, Los Altos Christian Church, Albuquerque
Rabbi Paul J. Citrin, Taos Jewish Center, Taos
Br. Jim Brown F.S.C., Roman Catholic, Santa Fe
Sr. Rose Marie Cecchini, MM, Coordinator, Office of Life, Peace, Justice & Creation, Catholic Charities of Gallup
Acacia McCombs, Member, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
Alan Tway, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Santa Fe
Alice Jacobson, United Methodist Church, Albuquerque
Alicia Ruch-Flynn, St. Paul Lutheran Church, ELCA, Albuquerque
Alyssa Floyd, Social Justice Council, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
Andre Kempton, Member, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
Angela Macelli, Social Justice Committee, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
Angus Gluck, member, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
Ann Donohue, St. Michael's and All Angels Episcopal Church, Albuquerque
Ann Harrison, First Unitarian Church, Albuquerque
Art Ramirez, New Mexico Faith Coalition for Immigrant Justice, Albuquerque
Barbara Convoy, Center for Spiritual Living, Santa Fe
Barbara Fuller, Central United Methodist Church, Albuquerque
Barbara Medina, Chair of Mission Committee, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Santa Fe

Bernadette Garcia, Prison Reform Ministry, Jesuit Community, Albuquerque
 Betsy Smith, Zia United Methodist Church of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Bette Fleishman, Prison Reform Ministry, Jesuit Community, Albuquerque
 Bill Jordan, former Adjunct Professor of Theology, Thomas More College, Albuquerque
 Bo Keppel, Social Justice Council, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
 Bob Gaines, Santa Fe Friend's Meeting, Interfaith Worker Justice – NM, Santa Fe
 Bobbie Falls, member, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Bonnie Korman, Taos Jewish Center, a founder and former board member, Taos
 Camilla Baca, Prison Reform Ministry, Jesuit Community, Albuquerque
 Carmen J. Chavez, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Santa Fe
 Ceci Tadfor, member, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Charlene Cebell, Chair of English Language Learning Project, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Santa Fe
 Charles Barbee, St. John's United Methodist Church, Santa Fe
 Charles Barbee, St. John's United Methodist Church, Santa Fe
 Chris Adolphi, St. Paul Lutheran Church, ELCA, Albuquerque
 Christopher Tompkins, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
 Cindy Piatt, Session Member, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Santa Fe
 Clark Drummond, member, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Consuelo Luz, Ha Makom, Santa Fe
 Cynthia Feiden-Warsh, Former VP Business Development, Optum Health, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
 Cynthia Kelley, member, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Dan Yohalem, Attorney at Law, Social Justice Council, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
 Daniel Rivera, Roman Catholic, Albuquerque
 David Camp, Member, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
 David Giltrow, Santa Fe Friends Meeting, Quakers, Santa Fe
 Deacon Anthony Trujillo, San Isidro Catholic Community, Santa Fe
 Deani, Travnick, Elder, Community of Christ, Albuquerque
 Diana Fessler, District Rep. UMW, Worship Assistant, United Methodist Church, Rio Rancho
 Dick Wimberly, Zia United Methodist Church, Santa Fe
 Dierk Watkin, member, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Dominique Mazeaud, Upaya Zen Center, Santa Fe
 Don Handrick, Resident Teacher, Thubten Norbu Ling Tibetan Buddhist Center, Santa Fe
 Donna Ormerod, Deacon, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Santa Fe
 Dr. Angela Merkert, Unitarian Universalist, Executive Director, CLNkids, Albuquerque
 Dr. David Henkel, Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), Santa Fe
 Dr. Maricela Bonilla, O.D. Member, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
 Dr. Mary D. Overpeck, Doctor of Public Health, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe
 Dr. Robert M. Bernstein, President, Physicians for Social Responsibility, NM Chapter, Congregation Beit Tikva, Santa Fe
 E. Franklin Hirsch, Santa Fe Friends Meeting, Quakers, Santa Fe
 Eileen Funck, Chair of Trustees, Zia United Methodist, Santa Fe
 Elaine Del Valle, Santa Fe Vipassana Sangha, Santa Fe People for Peace, Santa Fe
 Elise Piotowicz, Member, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
 Elizabeth Ares, Zia United Methodist Church, Santa Fe
 Elizabeth Drummond, member, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Elizabeth Stephens, Member, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
 Elizabeth West, Unitarian Universalist, Santa Fe
 Ellen Biderman, Social Justice Council, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
 Ellen Lefkowitz, Licensed Clinic Social Worker, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
 Ellen Wirt, Zia United Methodist Church of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Elliott Skinner, Friends Meeting of Santa Fe, Santa Fe People for Peace, Santa Fe
 Felis Otero, Prison Reform Ministry, Jesuit Community, Albuquerque
 Fr. Tom Smith, OFM, Director, Holy Cross Retreat Center, Mesilla Park
 Francine Blomberg, Member, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
 Gaile Herling, Coordinator, SFPS Adelante Program, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
 Gale Linn, Zia United Methodist, Santa Fe
 Gene Isaac Sandretto, Parish Council, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
 George Bayless, Retired Educator, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
 George Weston, member, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe

Gloria Lieberman, Social Justice Council, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
 Gloria Valdez, Chair, Christian Educators, All Saints Lutheran Church (ELCA), Albuquerque
 Gretchen Y. Bush, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Santa Fe
 Gustav Kolsis, Member, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
 Helen McDonald, Member, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
 Helen Mooney, member, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Horton Struve, Chair, Board of Directors, Zia United Methodist Church of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Isa Spoonheim, Bethlehem Lutheran Church of Los Alamos ELCA, Santa Fe
 Ivan Westergaard, St. Paul Lutheran Church ELCA, Albuquerque
 Jackie W. Tway, Liaison, Need and Deed Project for Homeless, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Santa Fe
 The Reverend Kirsten Sauey Hofmann, Trinity Lutheran Church (ELCA), Hobbs
 Jacqueline Nelson, Member, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
 James H. Applegate, member, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 James Kraemer, member, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Jan Thompson, Lay Leader, Unitarian Universalist Church of Las Cruces, Las Cruces
 Jane Hanna, Elder, Presbyterian (Church USA), Santa Fe
 Jane Schwartz, MA CCC-SLP, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
 Jane Yohalem, Attorney at Law, Social Justice Council, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
 Janet Gotkin, Social Justice Council, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
 Jesse Piotrowicz, M.S. P.E., Member, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
 Jessica Fisk, member, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Joan Alessi, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 JoAnn Bishop, Zia United Methodist Church of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 John Otter, Santa Fe People for Peace, Santa Fe
 John W. Singleton, MD, Session Member, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Santa Fe
 Joseph Austin, St. Michael & All Angels Episcopal Church, Albuquerque
 Joy Dinero, Prison Reform Ministry, Jesuit Community, Albuquerque
 Joyce M. Budai, member, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Julian Baca Jr., Prison Reform Ministry, Jesuit Community, Albuquerque
 Kaleen Kalama, United Methodist Women, Asbury United Methodist Church, Albuquerque
 Karen Borch, St. Paul Lutheran Church, ELCA, Albuquerque
 Shirley Nilsson, St Paul Lutheran Church, ELCA, Albuquerque
 Karin Roth, member, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Karli Wheeler, Santa Fe Friends Meeting, Quakers, Santa Fe
 Katherine Salazar, Elementary School Teacher, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
 Kathie Cole, Family Therapist, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
 Kathleen Christison, St. Bede's Episcopal Church, Santa Fe
 Kathryn C. Sherlock, PhD. - Unitarian-Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Kathryn Jones, Central United Methodist Church, Albuquerque
 Kathy Wanpovi Sanchez, Elder, Saya, Tewa Women United, San Ildefonso Pueblo
 Katrina Ortega, United Methodist Women, Asbury United Methodist Church, Albuquerque
 Kelley Allen, Sagebrush Community Church, Albuquerque
 Kelly Thrasher, Zia United Methodist Church, Santa Fe
 Ken Campbell, Board of Directors, Zia United Methodist Church of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Kevin N Hart, Deacon, Westminster Presbyterian, Santa Fe
 Kh. Photing Bethancourt, priest wife, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
 Kristiana Mc Clanahan, Member, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
 Laura Carson, Associate in Ministry, Peace Lutheran Church (ELCA), Las Cruces
 Lauren Dolan, Member, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Albuquerque
 Lauren Reichelt, Director of Health and Human Services Rio Arriba County, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
 Laurence Shandler, MD, Social Justice Committee, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
 LaVerne Steven, Central United Methodist Church, Albuquerque
 Linda C. FitzGerald, St. Paul Lutheran Church, ELCA, Albuquerque
 Linda Finch, NM Executive Committee, United Methodist Women, UMC, Albuquerque
 Linda Hibbs, Friends Meeting of Santa Fe, Santa Fe People for Peace, Santa Fe
 Linda Palmer, Zia United Methodist Church, Santa Fe
 Linda Robinson, Zia United Methodist Church of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Lindsay Waite, Prison Reform Ministry, Jesuit Community, Albuquerque

Louise Singleton, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Santa Fe
 Lydia Pendley, Co-Group Leader, RESULTS-Santa Fe, St. Bede's Episcopal Church, Santa Fe
 Lynn McKelvey, Social Justice Committee, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
 Major Kenneth E. Mayers USMCR (Ret'd), Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Eldorado
 Marcelle Grant, Licensed Independent Social Worker, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
 Marcia Barcelona, Santa Fe Friends Meeting, Quakers, Santa Fe
 Marcia Reifman, Educator, Santa Fe Community College, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
 Margaret A. Powers, Member, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
 Marguerite Kearns, Santa Fe Friends Meeting, Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Marian Goad, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Santa Fe
 Marilie Blanchard, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Santa Fe
 Marion Seymour, Social Justice Committee, Unitarian Universalist Congregation, Santa Fe
 Marjorie Young, People of Peace, Santa Fe Friend's Meeting, Santa Fe
 Mary E. Hoggard, Lay Leader, Zia United Methodist Church of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Mary Lucey, Zia United Methodist Church of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Mary Shepperd, St. Michael & All Angels Episcopal Church, Albuquerque
 Matthew Lewis, PhD, Member, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
 Melanie Smith, RN, SPRC Chair, Zia United Methodist Church of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Melinda Silver Social Justice Council, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
 Melissa Lewis, Member, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
 Meredith Machen, Church of Religious Science, President, League of Women Voters-NM, Santa Fe
 Michael Andberg, member, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Michael Simon, Santa Fe Friends Meeting, Quakers, Santa Fe
 Monsignor Bennett J. Voorhies, Ecumenical Officer, Archdiocese of Santa Fe
 Nancita Boyes, Member, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
 Nancy Smith, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Norman Frederick Schreiner, Jr. DM, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Pastor Anne Morawski, Lutheran Campus Ministry at UNM & CNM, ELCA, Albuquerque
 Patricia Steindler, Environmental Task Force, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Patty Coulter, United Methodist Church, Albuquerque
 Paul Pennell, Zia United Methodist Church of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Paula Hildebrand, Central United Methodist Church, Albuquerque
 Paula Price, Member, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
 Paula Steinert, Registered Nurse, Christ Lutheran Church (ELCA), Santa Fe
 Peggy Medina Giltrow, Santa Fe Friends Meeting, Quakers, Santa Fe
 Peter Norby, Santa Fe Friends Meeting, Quakers, Santa Fe
 Philip McClanahan, M.T.S., Member, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
 Rabbi Ben Morrow, Rabbi Emeritus, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
 Rabbi Malka Drucker, HaMakom: The Place for Passionate and Progressive Judaism, Santa Fe
 Rabbi Neil Amswych, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
 Rachel Garcia, Zia United Methodist Church of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Ralph Nava, Sub Deacon, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
 Rashid C Hudson, Taha Mosque, Santa Fe
 Rebecca Baran-Rees, Social Justice Director, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
 Rebecca Ostrovsky, Social Justice Committee, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
 Rebecca Scheib, St. Paul Lutheran Church, ELCA, Albuquerque
 Rebecca Sprague, Santa Fe Friends Meeting, Quakers, Santa Fe
 Reginald Patrick Blount, Parish Council, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
 Renee Wolters, First Unitarian Universalist Church, NM Faith Coalition for Immigrant Justice, Albuquerque
 Rev. Angela Herrera, Minister, First Unitarian Church, Albuquerque
 Rev. Anne Morawski, Lutheran Campus Ministry at UNM & CNM (ELCA), Albuquerque
 Rev. Canon Dr. Thomas Lowe, SOSc Rector, St. John's Episcopal Church, Alamogordo
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 Richard J. Ciccarello, St. Timothy's Lutheran Church (ELCA), Albuquerque
 Richard J. Valdez, All Saints Lutheran Church (ELCA), Albuquerque
 Richard L. Harrison, St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, Albuquerque Interfaith, Albuquerque
 Richard Roth, member, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Robb Thomson, member, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Robert Gaines, Santa Fe Friend's Meeting, Santa Fe
 Robert Miles, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Santa Fe
 Robert Salcido, Prison Reform Ministry, Jesuit Community, Albuquerque
 Robert Stearns, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Roberta Scott, Zia United Methodist Church of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Roger Brumley, member, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Ron Solimon, Central United Methodist Church (UMC), Albuquerque
 Sandy Rasich, member, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Sara B. Love, St. Timothy's Lutheran Church (ELCA), Albuquerque
 Sarah Granger, Member, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
 Shary Tompkins, Chair, Parish Council, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
 Sheila Tryk, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Santa Fe
 Sr. Joan Brown, ofc, Franciscan Sister, Executive Director of New Mexico Interfaith Power and Light, Albuquerque
 Sr. Marlene Perrotte, ism, Mercy Sister, Albuquerque
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 Steve Machen, Unitarian Universalist, Chairman, Board of Directors of El Rancho de las Golondrinas, Santa Fe
 Susan Bernstein, Clinic Social Worker, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
 Susan H. Margison, St. Paul Lutheran Church, ELCA, Albuquerque
 Susan H. Matsui, St. Paul Lutheran Church, ELCA, Albuquerque
 Susanna Eagan, Member, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
 Suzanne Breslauer, Coordinator Interfaith Leadership Alliance of Santa Fe, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
 Tara Bloyd, Santa Fe Friends Meeting, Quakers, Santa Fe
 Terrie R. Burnett, LMSW Program Director, Lutheran Family Services Rocky Mountains, Albuquerque
 Terrance Robinson, Zia United Methodist Church of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Terri Christiansen, St. Timothy's Lutheran Church (ELCA), Albuquerque
 The Rev. Ben Larzelere III, retired, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, Santa Fe
 The Rev. Canon Jean Campbell, Episcopal Church USA, Rio Rancho
 The Rev. Charles R. Exley, retired ELCA, Albuquerque
 The Rev. Dr. Al Staggs, Pastor, First United Methodist Church, Grants

The Rev. Dr. Don Childers, Interim Pastor, First Christian Church of Santa Fe, Los Alamos
 The Rev. Dr. G. Frederick Schott, Ph. D., Therapist, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Santa Fe
 The Rev. Dr. Suzanne Redfern-Campbell, Developmental Minister, Unitarian Universalist Church of Las Cruces
 The Rev. Guillermo Yela, Pastor, Camino de Vida Presbyterian/Lutheran Church, Albuquerque
 The Rev. Kay Huggins, Interim Executive Director, New Mexico Conference of Churches, Albuquerque
 The Rev. LaVonne Johnson-Holt, pastor, St. Mark's Lutheran Church (ELCA), Roswell
 The Rev. Nicole Raddu Ferry, Youth, Family & Education Pastor, Bethlehem Lutheran Church (ELCA), Los Alamos
 The Rev. R. Adam Berndt, Lead Pastor, Cross of Hope Lutheran Church & Schools (ELCA), Albuquerque
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 The Reverend Betsy Bueschel, retired United Church of Christ, Santa Fe
 The Reverend Brendalyn Batchelor, Minister, Unity of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 The Reverend Dean H. Lewis, Presbytery of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 The Reverend Dr. Georgia Ortiz, Presbyterian Clergy, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Santa Fe
 The Reverend Dr. Steve Long, Pastor, Tender Mercy Baptist Church, Bosque Farms
 The Reverend Dr. William Stark, Presbyterian Clergy, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Santa Fe
 The Reverend Frank Yates, interim pastor, 1st Presbyterian Church, Las Vegas
 The Reverend Harold Nilsson, retired, St. Paul Lutheran, ELCA, Albuquerque
 The Reverend James D Brown, Retired Presbyterian Minister, Eldorado
 The Reverend Jan Gough, Presbyterian Clergy, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Santa Fe
 The Reverend Jan Gough, Presbytery of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 The Reverend Jay Spoonhiem, Retired, Bethlehem Lutheran Church of Los Alamos ELCA, Santa Fe
 The Reverend Jim Leehan, Retired, St. Bede's Episcopal Church Santa Fe
 The Reverend Lee Walters, Presbyterian Clergy, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Santa Fe
 The Reverend Lee Walters, United Church of Christ of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 The Reverend Richard Avery, Presbyterian Clergy, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Santa Fe
 The Reverend Robert Aubrey, Monte Vista Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Albuquerque
 The Reverend Robert Craig, retired Presbyterian minister, Albuquerque
 The Reverend Scott Penrod, Senior Minister, First United Methodist Church, Gallup
 The Reverend Stephanie M. Harmon, United Methodist Church, Carlsbad
 The Reverend Warren L. Robinson, Pastor/ Owen Chapel, AME Church, Alamogordo
 The Very Rev. John Bethancourt, Pastor, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Santa Fe
 The Very Rev. Mike Olsen, Rector, St. James Episcopal Church, Taos
 Tina Cordova, Risen Savior Catholic Parish, Albuquerque
 Tina Garcia, Prison Reform Ministry, Jesuit Community, Albuquerque
 Vern C. Hagen, Central United Methodist Church, Albuquerque
 Victoria A. Hagen, Central United Methodist Church, Albuquerque
 Wanda Dawley, member, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Will Karp, Social Justice Council, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe
 William Hoffman, St. Luke Lutheran Church (ELCA), Albuquerque
 William Robinson, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Santa Fe
 Zelig Pollon, member, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 The Reverend Munro Sickafoose, Affiliated Minister, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, Santa Fe
 Rabbi Min Kantrowitz, Educator and Chaplain, Albuquerque

