

In Support of the Release of Puerto Rican Political Prisoners

Justice and Witness Ministries

Report submitted by Sala Nolan

At General Synod in 2011, a resolution was passed entitled "In Support of the release of Puerto Rican Political Prisoners" which directed the General Minister and President to write to the President of the United States to request release of these prisoners. GS specifically asked that two names be highlighted in this action: Oscar Lopez Rivera, who has served for more than 30 years in federal prisons, and whose release is requested on humanitarian grounds; and Avelino Gonzalez Claudio, suffering from Parkinson's disease, for whom we request release on grounds of compassion. In addition, the letter is to speak against inhumane treatment in US prisons generally, including the injustice of long sentences, and the lack of compassion and lack of medical care exemplified by these two cases.

Earlier update: We have been waiting for a moment when this letter can receive its best hearing. The timing seems to be right to present this letter to the President of the United States in the next few weeks. There is a growing understanding within the states, and especially in Ohio by way of example, that extremely long sentences are counterproductive to everyone, including those who must maintain the prison system. Although our reasons for requesting the release of these two prisoners is not based on economic efficiency, we do believe its contents can be heard now, and suggest that the letter be sent by mid-March.

UPDATE March 2013: Avelino Gonzalez Claudio, who was arrested in 2008 in Puerto Rico for a robbery that took place in 1983, was released from federal prison and returned to Puerto Rico in December 2012, for participation in a community prisoner re-entry program. Gonzalez Claudio is a former leader of Puerto Rican nationalists calling for independence. He is nearing 70 years of age, and suffers from Parkinson's disease. It is hoped that he will receive improved medical care for this condition.

It has been determined by the network of supporters calling for the release of Oscar Lopez Rivera and the UCC leadership that the climate has not been right for sending direct requests for release of these prisoners to President Obama.

In the interim, the Revs. Geoffrey Black, Linda Jaramillo and Sala Nolan Gonzales went to the federal prison at Terre Haute, Indiana for a personal visit in August, 2012. This visit was only allowed following a full year of repeated requests for pastoral visitation.

We have sent out a JPAN alert with letters to be sent to prison officials asking them to release the two political prisoners. On the website, we have noted the outcome of the most recent parole board hearing for Oscar on February 18, 2011, in which parole was denied and a 15 year stipulation was made for the next opportunity for a parole hearing. This is, essentially, a life sentence. The website offers additional information and addresses and facsimile numbers to press for freedom for Oscar.

We continue to provide education on the consequences and futility of extreme and harsh punishment, noting that Oscar Lopez Rivera has been held in prison for more than 32 years, despite never having been charged with or convicted of any violent crime.