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Tamms inmate hunger strike remembered in prayer

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Abstract (Summary)

The Rev Al Sampson, pastor of Chicago's Fernwood United Methodist Church, and members of the Political Action Committee (PAC) on May 16, 2001 announced a prayer vigil remembering the 37-day hunger strike by Tamms Supermax prisons protesting alleged "inhumane" treatment. The vigil will be held on May 19 at First United Methodist Church Chicago Temple, and at Sampson's church.

Full Text (555 words)

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Tamms inmate hunger strike remembered in prayer

The Rev. Al Sampson, pastor of the Fernwood United Methodist Church, and members of the Political Action Committee (PAC) Wednesday announced a prayer vigil remembering the 37-day hunger strike by Tamms Supermax prisoners protesting against alleged "inhumane" treatment.

It was a year ago that the inmates vowed not to eat for 37 days, due to alleged "horrible" treatment at the downstate Supermax facilities, where once again inmates have reached beyond the walls of their \$76 million facility designed to hold 550 men but is reportedly slightly more than half full, for support to highlighting their cause.

Sampson and Gwen Wadlington, PAC's project coordinator for Tamms, announced they are holding a prayer vigil for the Tamms inmates at 3 p.m. on Saturday at the First United Methodist Church Chicago Temple, 77 W.Washington, and at Sampson's Church, 10057 S. Wallace.

"There is no educational, recreational, day-to-day program at Tamms...no work-training opportunities at Tamms. It is the most isolated prison system in America," said Sampson.

"There have been no studies to show how this isolation affects a person who remains incarcerated for 23-hours a day.... For some inmates, this has been going on for years. There is no monthly or quarterly check-ups. There have been no African American psychiatrists or psychologists to observe them....

"Tamms is the most inhumane prison system ever coming out of the culture of the prison system to isolate somebody 23-hours in one space with no TV, no access to other people....," said Sampson. "We're concerned about the (social and psychological) damage that Tamms is creating."

However, in previous interviews, Illinois Department of Corrections officials say Tamms is necessary and that it houses the "worse of the worst" of prisoners.

But, Wadlington said prison officials are "wrong" and that is why they are holding the vigil to remind the public of the "horrors that are going on at Tamms.... It's important to remember the anniversary of the initial hunger strike so that those men will know what they did was not in vain.

"The conditions and the problems going on down there...such as the renunciation policy, where the administration tries to force the inmates to inform on gang affiliations are for real....

"The administration is trying to make the inmates renounce their gang affiliation just to get out of Tamms, but, if they trick on others, that would be dangerous.

"Once they are released to other prisons, and others find out that they trick (identify) on someone, they do bodily harm to them because they don't want anyone in their gang organization to be an informant. They put a hit on not only them but their family members, too," she warned.

"Prison officials are transferring mental prisoners there and those who are 'jail house lawyers.' The administration figures these 'lawyers' are a threat to them because they know the law and are helping the inmates...something they don't want them to do...."

Saying Tamms is an "unfit" facility, Wadlington said in some instances "they're housing men who have not received disciplinary tickets in years.... They are trying to break their mental and physical spirits because they're not permitted to call their families.

For more information, call Sampson at: 773-445-7125, the PAC at: 773-874-7390, and Pat, another member of the Tamms Committee, at: 847-487-2446.

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