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Clergy join push to legalize marijuana in mission of social justice



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The marijuana decriminalization bill that could soon go to Gov. Bruce Rauner's desk has an array of supporters, including civil libertarians, prosecutors and lawmakers on both sides of the aisle.

Its supporters also include clergy. Protestant pastors and Jewish rabbis are lobbying lawmakers in Illinois and in states across the Northeast as part of a push toward legalization, which they see as a moral cause encompassing issues such as race, fair housing and employment.

To that end, the group, called Clergy for a New Drug Policy, is pushing for legislation to tax and regulate cannabis, refer individuals charged with drug-related crimes to treatment, eliminate mandatory minimum sentences and support medical marijuana.

"It's a primary change if something is decriminalized," said the Rev. Al Sharp, the Chicago pastor who launched the group this spring. "The goal is to change the culture of punishment in this country, which the war on drugs has contributed so thoroughly and so devastatingly to."

Sharp considers himself just as much a policy wonk as he is a pastor. As the former head of nonprofit agencies such as Protestants for the Common Good and the Community Renewal Society, groups founded as alternatives to the religious right, he has made lobbying for public policies such as more education funding and better housing his ministry.

These days, Sharp, who was ordained by the United Church of Christ, walks the corridors of state capitols preaching redemption.

When legislators in Springfield recently approved a bill to remove criminal penalties for simple marijuana possession, replacing the threat of jail time and a criminal record with a sanction similar to a traffic ticket, Sharp and his fellow clergy claimed victory.

If the bill is signed into law, Illinois will join 17 other states in decriminalizing the possession of small amounts of marijuana, according to the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws, or NORML, a group that advocates the legal use of marijuana. Nearly half the country, including Illinois, already allows for the use of medical marijuana.

The state-by-state decriminalization wave follows a push for tougher laws that began in 1971 when then-President Richard Nixon officially declared a "war on drugs." Mandatory minimum sentences went into effect in the late 1980s. A decade later, collateral consequences such as the disproportionate effect on African-Americans became clear. According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, federal prison populations ballooned from nearly 25,000 in 1980 to more than 219,000 in 2013. Recidivism also escalated as criminal records prevented many ex-offenders from securing employment or housing.

In 2002, the Unitarian Universalist Association became the first religious denomination to adopt a statement of conscience calling for an end to the nation's war on drugs and the legalization and regulation of marijuana. While no other denomination has called for such a radical policy change, many others, including the United Methodist Church, Union for Reform Judaism, Progressive National Baptist Convention and Episcopal Church, support the controlled use of marijuana for medical reasons.

"It's a bigger issue than just making marijuana legal," said the Rev. Tom Capo, pastor of DuPage Unitarian Universalist Church in Naperville. "My position is that it's more important for us to be healing these people."

When word spread that state Sen. Linda Holmes, D-Aurora, might not support decriminalization, Capo called her office to make his case. While it's unclear if his call made an impact, Holmes was one of 37 senators who voted in favor of the bill.

"My hope is that we do reach a point to say that marijuana is no longer a controlled substance, and understand that, instead of putting people in prison, we need to offer them assistance, counseling drug rehab so they can put their lives back together," Capo said. "Putting them in prison does not stop people from using drugs. It just isolates them from the rest of the society."

Sharp said he recognizes that Unitarian Universalists were ahead of their time. "Part of my mission is to say to the Unitarians, 'I'm here to help you implement your own policy,'" he said. "Clergy are stepping up to that."

While the precise language of Illinois' marijuana decriminalization bill is still a work in progress before it goes to Rauner's desk, it stipulates that low-level cannabis possession would no longer be a crime with fines of up to \$2,500 and up to a year in a jail.

Instead, those caught with 15 grams or less could pay a fine of up to \$125, but cities like Chicago that already have fines in place for marijuana possession could keep their fee structures.

Capo would like to see a treatment component added. "I certainly realize there's going to be a lot of change in the way we deal with drugs in our society," Capo said. "For me this is a social justice issue."