



A Call to Say No to Torture

The terrorist attack on September 11, 2001 was a heartbreaking tragedy we will never forget. That catastrophe is also an opportunity to witness to the power of God. Some have said that everything changed on the morning of 9/11, but it did not. We were challenged, but our beliefs and our society are stronger than a handful of terrorists. As Christians, we know that our hope and security come from one place only: our full trust and complete confidence in Jesus Christ, our risen Lord and Savior. Unfortunately, instead of taking comfort from the strength we have in God, instead of drawing on our nation's standards of decency and justice, too often we have given way to the temptation to fear and, in fear, we have jeopardized some of the very things we value most.

Due process has given way to secret detentions, justice has given way to expediency, and humane treatment of prisoners has given way to torture. We are told that our country does not torture prisoners, but our heads and our hearts tell us differently. Hidden, institutionalized torture has become routine. Doing things beyond our borders, or having others do them for us, does nothing to lessen our responsibility.

Torture threatens the very nature of our society. Torture degrades us more than its victims. Torture puts us and our troops at risk from those seeking vengeance. We must adhere to our principles for our own sake, as well as out of concern for others. To be aware and be silent is to be complicit. As Christians and patriots we cannot be silent; we must say "no."

We must not let fear or hatred be our motivation individually or as a nation. Instead, we must trust that "God is love... and perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God,' but hate their brothers or sisters are liars..." (1 John 4:10b, 18–20a).

As Presbyterians we are aware of God's sovereign call to witness to Christ's reconciling work of justice and love. Central to this are the hard tasks of speaking the truth to power and loving our enemies. While those who conspire to terrorize innocents must be brought to justice, we cannot achieve this by terrorizing others who may be innocent.

In response to a groundswell of concern, we invite all Presbyterians to join us in a three-month period of prayer, study, discussion, and action focused on the treatment of those detained by and at the request of the United States and its allies in the four years since September 11, 2001. Our invitation is grounded in a growing concern we hear from Presbyterians who are theologically diverse, including those who have served with distinction in the Armed Forces and those who have spent their entire adult lives working for peace and the abolition of war. The 216th General Assembly spoke forcefully on matters regarding terrorism, violence, war, and the use of torture. While not all Presbyterians agree with every action of the General Assembly, we are committed to pursuing honest discussion and seeking common ground to speak to these difficult issues. Therefore, we invite individuals and congregations:

To pray: We pray for those who are detained and their families, and we pray for our troops and their families. Those who serve their country must never be asked to treat prisoners in ways that are contrary to the law, their own conscience, or basic human dignity.

We pray for ourselves and our nation. We must strive to create a climate of religious tolerance and respect, rather than perpetuate a cycle of fear and vengeance. Expressing our outrage and demanding an end to torture in all its forms is the first step.

To study: Abuse and torture are complex and difficult issues, but knowing the truth—even uncomfortable truths—can set us free to act. Therefore, a group of concerned Presbyterians has developed a curriculum to be used by congregations and others who wish to study the facts carefully in light of their faith.

To Dialogue: We are called to be in thoughtful, respectful dialogue with one another, seeking common ground and listening carefully to one another when we disagree. In so doing, we know that our witness as followers of Jesus Christ becomes ever stronger and more faithful.

To speak out: Our faith and our country's constitution remind us that it is our duty to ask hard questions of those in power and to speak out whenever truth is compromised.

We call on the United States and its allies to invite an independent and impartial investigation of the conditions under which detainees are held and by whose orders they are being held. The truth must be convincingly told. For Jesus says, "Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not be known. Therefore, what you have said in the dark will be heard in the light and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed from the housetops" (Luke 12:2–3).

We call for these investigations toward the goal of eliminating torture and holding accountable all those who are responsible. We further call for the release of those who have not been charged with any crime, and demand fair and speedy trials for those who have been accused.

To these ends, we encourage Presbyterians to lift up their concerns with their elected officials. Current information and advocacy suggestions will be posted on the Act Now section of the Presbyterian Peacemaking Web site: www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/

To come together: All are invited to become part of a rapidly growing grassroots network by signing on at www.no2torture.org.

We also invite all those who are concerned to a meeting in Miami on January 6 and 7, 2006, to make a public witness and further organize our efforts to call upon our nation and allies to treat all detainees humanely and justly. More information about this gathering will be posted on the No2Torture and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Web sites listed above.

We give thanks for the overwhelming grace that comes as a free gift from our God. We know, however, that the gift of God's grace is not cheap, and we dare not cheapen it by living lives of timidity and fear. God commands that we seek the truth and say "no" to what is wrong, that we might be free to join with God and our neighbors to build what is just. The cross of Jesus Christ makes it clear that God's love is stronger than torture and fear.

Rick Ufford-Chase
Moderator, 216th General Assembly (2004)
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Ed Brogan
Director, Presbyterian Council for Chaplains