

# ECUMENICAL MINISTRIES *of* OREGON

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## **Ending U.S.-sponsored torture forever**

The attempted car bombing in New York City's Times Square on May 1, 2010, brought back the feelings of fear and vulnerability that most of us felt in December with the news of the Christmas Day bomber and on Sept. 11, 2001, when we learned of the devastating attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Our nation's leaders felt that vulnerability even more intensely because they had to make sure that an attack like Sept. 11 would never happen again.

Unfortunately, after 9/11, our nation's leaders decided to engage in torture to obtain information from detainees. According to the Department of Justice, torture techniques used by the military and the CIA included: putting detainees in extreme stress positions (including being handcuffed to overhead bars with the detainees' feet barely touching the ground), throwing detainees against a flexible false wall built for "walling" them, forced nudity, extreme temperatures, depriving detainees of sleep for long periods of time, and waterboarding them.

Torture is immoral, against U.S. law and it does not make our nation safer. A former U.S. Air Force interrogator Matthew Alexander has said that U.S.-sponsored torture was used by Al Qaeda to recruit more young people who wanted revenge against the United States because of our torture policies.

Torture contradicts our nation's deepest values and corrupts the moral fabric of our society. Some things are always wrong and, like slavery, rape and genocide, international law states that torture also falls into this category.

The religions of the world disagree on many things, but they are united on an affirmation of the dignity and respect due to all human beings. Some religions say that people are created in the image of God.

Similarly, there is a consensus that people of faith are called to heal brokenness, not cause it. The word torture comes from the French word for "twist" – twisting an object to the point of breaking it. Religion teaches us that human beings are not to be broken, but are to be respected.

How do we make sure that torture never happens again? The National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT) is calling for an impartial, nonpartisan Commission of Inquiry that would investigate torture practices since 9/11 to determine what we need to do to make sure we never use torture again.

A Commission of Inquiry, which can be established by the President or Congress, would gather all the facts and make recommendations. It would ascertain the extent to which our interrogation practices have constituted torture and "cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment." Understanding the causes, nature and scope of U.S.-sponsored torture is essential for preventing it in the future and eliminating it from our system without loopholes.

Some have said that Congress and the President have too much to do right now to get bogged down in learning from the past in order to create a future free of U.S.-sponsored torture. Though it will not be an easy task, this work is needed now and should not be left to the next generations of Americans.

In the Book of Isaiah there is a conversation between Isaiah and King Hezekiah in which Isaiah warns the King that Assyria will conquer the King's land, take the King's children and put all of the next

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African Methodist Episcopal Church ■ American Baptist Churches of Oregon ■ Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) ■ Christian Methodist Episcopal Church ■ Church of the Brethren ■ Community of Christ  
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generation into exile. King Hezekiah shortsightedly responds, "At least there will be peace in my day." Hezekiah does not respond to Isaiah's warning, and his children's generation is sent into exile. It is often a human trait to be so worried about the challenges in the present that we transfer to the next generations the problems we are responsible for addressing today.

Ending U.S.-sponsored torture forever will not be easy, but we need to start now. Let's not require future generations to undertake what we should accomplish ourselves.

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