

A Call for Prophetic Witness to Abolish Torture from the Conference Ministers of the New England Region

**UNITED CHURCH
OF CHRIST**



May 2008

Dear Sisters and Brothers

All practices of injustice impel us as people of faith to give vigorous witness to oppose them. Torture, as one of those practices, is so egregious, that if we fail to raise our voices and to act, the very stones will cry out. As Conference Ministers in New England we are jointly issuing this pastoral epistle, A Call for Prophetic Witness To Abolish Torture, as a way of raising our voices. We are calling on you, clergy and members of United Church of Christ congregations in our six New England Conferences, to join with us in this witness to abolish US-sponsored torture.

Seared into our consciousness and consciences are the photographs of Iraqi detainees in Abu Ghraib Prison. One photograph of a man, draped in a black shroud, standing as if on an auction block, arms outstretched in a cruciform posture, with electric wires dangling from his extremities, has become iconic. The images have been shocking and harrowing. So too has been the knowledge that our own government has engaged in and tolerated torture. While publicly denying it, our government has promoted torture as policy and practice, including waterboarding, so called “enhanced” interrogation techniques, extraordinary rendition to countries that torture, and secret prisons where these horrible activities occur out of sight.

Such practices are illegal, in violation of the US Constitution and of international law, specifically the Geneva Conventions and the UN Convention Against Torture, both of which the US has signed. Equally as troubling to us as people of faith, such practices are immoral, a sin against our fellow human beings and a sin against God. Since we are all created in the image of God, in a real way every act of torture and prisoner abuse shatters and desecrates God’s image. In words from a resolution passed by the Reform Rabbinate, “In every shriek of those in unbearable pain, in every crazed nightmare of those who are denied sleep for days and weeks at a time, in every muffled moan of those plunged under water for minutes at a time, trying not to breathe lest they drown, God is broken. God is defiled.”

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews 13:3b exhorts us to “remember those ... who are being tortured, as though you yourself were being tortured” We best “remember” those who are being tortured by working to abolish torture, without exceptions. We have included with this letter proposed actions steps that congregations and individuals within congregations can take. To facilitate and support us in this work, the national UCC Justice and Witness Ministries has created a website: UCCAgainstTorture.org. This website will link our work and witness to that of the National Religious Campaign against Torture, currently with a membership of over 150 faith-based organizations – national, regional, and local – reflecting the wide diversity of religious groups in this country. The United Church of Christ nationally is a Participating Member. As several of our Conferences are already endorsing members we encourage our congregations to do the same.

The time to mobilize and speak up is now. This is, we believe, a kairos moment. June is Torture Awareness month. During the months leading up to the presidential elections, we have the opportunity and obligation to persuade the next president to abolish US-sponsored torture, without exceptions. As the Statement of Conscience of the National Religious Campaign Against Torture states: Nothing less is at stake in the torture abuse crisis than the soul of our nation. And, we add, the souls of our nation’s people.

Grace and peace to you:

The Rev. Jim Antal, Massachusetts Conference of the UCC
The Rev. Charles Barnes, Rhode Island Conference of the UCC
The Rev. Carole Carlson, Vermont Conference of the UCC
The Rev. Davida Foy Crabtree, Connecticut Conference of the UCC
The Rev. David R. Gaewski, Maine Conference of the UCC
The Rev. Gary Schulte, New Hampshire Conference of the UCC