

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Speaks on Torture

Human rights have been the subject of many statements by Presbyterian General Assemblies. The Assemblies have been motivated by a Christian conviction that the church is responsible to speak on behalf of its neighbors' welfare. This concern for human rights has been expressed in many ways, including opposition to the use of torture: "No human agency has the right to own, manipulate, brainwash, torture, physically eliminate, experiment with, or deny the existence of any human being." (Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1978, p. 186). The 161st General Assembly (1949) of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America voted its support of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, a document that contains the provision: "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment." The 204th General Assembly (1992) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) commended the United States Senate for ratifying the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, and Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

The 216th General Assembly (2004) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) adopted "A Resolution and Confession on the Torture and Abuse of Prisoners." This resolution called "upon the whole Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), while recognizing the honorable performance of the majority of coalition forces . . . , to join with the commissioners to

- a. reaffirm our support for human rights and the Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War;
- b. explicitly reject torture and abuse as methods of interrogation and treatment of prisoners for they are inconsistent with the Gospel; and
- c. acknowledge we are inescapably part of our culture and offer our confession in repentance."

Recognizing that "efforts must be made to ensure that such torture and abuse do not occur in the future," the Assembly directed the Stated Clerk to:

- a. "Commend all who have brought this prison abuse to the attention of the public as well as all who have recognized the seriousness of the issues raised and the need to deal vigorously with the policy and administrative questions that are involved;
- b. Urge the U.S. Congress to direct an appropriate independent and formal inquiry to determine what led to these events. This body should have full investigative powers and issue its findings publicly.
- c. Urge government officials to develop safeguards that will serve to prevent such behavior from arising in the future."

The 217th General Assembly (2006) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) took two actions related to torture. The Assembly voted to call for a formal congressional inquiry into how torture came to be used in U.S. military and other prisons. The Assembly also voted to:

- "Affirm that the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) opposes the use of torture and all forms of 'cruel, inhuman, or degrading' interrogation by all agencies, employees, or agents of the United States government, and all foreign governments and/or combatants, and supports the application of the Geneva Conventions to all enemy soldiers and the humane treatment with due process for all combatants held by U.S. forces anywhere in the world, and supports the provisions of the Bill of Rights and the principles of judicial review and congressional oversight over Executive branch operations, now including counterterrorism, Homeland Security, and domestic surveillance programs, both classified and publicly acknowledged;
- Endorse congressional and judicial remedies for the use of torture and illegal detention by agencies of the U.S. government, such as the appointment of a special counsel, open hearings, appropriate investigation, and legislation outlawing the use of 'extraordinary rendition' and extraterritorial prison facilities;
- Request the Stated Clerk and the Moderator of the 217th General Assembly (2006) to include salient concerns of this report in any public summary of the assembly;
- Encourage members, sessions, presbyteries, and synods to pray for all victims of human rights abuse and those who persecute them, particularly in their observances of Human Rights Day (each December 10), to seek ways to assist these victims and prevent further abuse of others."

Visit www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/actnow/actnow.htm#stoptorture to find the statements of the General Assemblies. Human Rights updates, including international surveys and Bible studies, also are available at www.pcusa.org/acswp or by mail.



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