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Rev. Ron Stief
Executive Director
National Religious Campaign Against Torture
Faith communities continued to contribute to national momentum to end solitary confinement and to significant state legislative advances in 2016, including the passage of legislation to protect youth from solitary confinement in California’s juvenile detention facilities. Members of the New York Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement, pictured here, continued their organizing to support passage of the Humane Alternatives to Long Term (HALT) Solitary Confinement Act. At the federal level, in January 2016, the Department of Justice released its Report and Recommendations Concerning the Use of Restrictive Housing. Calling solitary “an affront to our common humanity,” in a Washington Post op-ed, then-President Obama announced adoption of the more than fifty “Guiding Principles” contained within the report, setting new standards in federal prisons and providing guidelines for prisons and jails nationwide.

In 2016, NRCAT began working on the issue of armed drones, and took leadership in the Interfaith Working Group on Drone Warfare, a coalition of policy staff of our national faith partners in Washington, DC. NRCAT drafted an interfaith transition statement on the moral implications of drone warfare that was shared with the incoming Administration.

Drones and other lethal robots threaten to distance decision-makers from the moral and psychological implications of using force—potentially incentivizing the use of lethal force and putting both civilians and combatants who could be captured or otherwise neutralized at additional risk. Just during the Obama presidency we saw a massive increase in the number of drone strikes—strikes that were legitimatized by the “othering” of target populations.

“...it is the knowledge of torture’s dubious efficacy and the strong moral objections to the abuse of prisoners that has forged broad, bipartisan agreement on this issue.”

SENATOR JOHN MCCAIN

People of faith across the U.S. continued to call on President Obama to close Guantanamo and end indefinite detention, including this group from the Reformed Church of Highland Park, New Jersey demonstrating in front of the U.S. Supreme Court. Unfortunately, despite President Obama’s stated intention to close the prison, Guantanamo remains open, with 41 people detained there after the end of his presidency. While 41 is a significant decrease from the 242 people who were held there at the start of his presidency, and an even larger decrease from the 780 people who were once imprisoned there, it is still 41 too many.

During Torture Awareness Month, NRCAT-affiliated faith leaders from around the country preached about indefinite detention while wearing orange jump suits in solidarity with those in Guantanamo. Additionally, NRCAT distributed orange ribbon pins for congregants to wear in services during the month.
In the fall of 2016, NRCAT staffer Rev. Laura Markle Downton joined an event at the United Nations hosted by then-UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, Juan Méndez, marking the release of a new report, *Seeing into Solitary*, comparing the use of solitary in 35 jurisdictions globally. The findings in the report underscore that the U.S. is among the most punitive in its use of isolation globally and issue a moral call to action for communities of faith and conscience.

In the midst of the worst refugee crisis since World War II, 2016 saw refugees compared to poisonous “skittles”, amid calls for banning refugees. Those fleeing torture and persecution need our welcome, not closed doors. NRCAT mobilized people of faith to welcome refugees in their own communities and to call on Congress to continue to welcome refugees.

Maintaining a rapid response capacity is key for responding to public acts of bigotry and hatred. Following the June shooting at a club in Orlando, NRCAT joined a response with #RootedInLove. NRCAT staffer T.C. Morrow gave remarks during a Washington, DC service of solidarity, and she penned an op-ed published by The Hill, “Don’t Let Act of Homophobia Become Excuse for Islamophobia.”

The anti-Muslim rhetoric of the campaign trail and spike in hate crimes after the election demonstrate the need for people of all faiths to stand together to advance true religious freedom. In July, NRCAT joined with advocates from Washington, DC faith offices to deliver a Religious Freedom Pledge Against Bigotry and Exclusion to every Member of Congress. NRCAT and Shoulder to Shoulder launched the pledge to confront bigotry based on religion.

Building up the next generation of human rights leaders is vital to sustaining momentum for long-term change. In 2016, NRCAT utilized *The Guardian’s* 9-minute “6x9” virtual reality experience of solitary confinement to educate young people nationwide about extreme isolation at major national religious conferences, including the Islamic Circle of North America’s National Convention in Baltimore and the National Youth Event, hosted by the United Church of Christ and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Orlando. NRCAT continued its national tour of a solitary confinement cell replica to campuses and museums across the U.S., notably at the Freedom Center of the National Museum of the Underground Railroad in Cincinnati and Kean University’s Human Rights Institute Conference in New Jersey.

NRCAT partnered with Solitary Watch to provide orientations for communities of faith nationwide to participate in *Lifelines to Solitary*, an ongoing prison correspondence program specifically designed to reach out to people in solitary confinement. NRCAT collaborated with award-winning playwright and activist, Julia Steele Allen, in support of a national tour of *Mariposa & the Saint: From Solitary Confinement, A Play Through Letters*. The play is based entirely on letters written between Sara (Mariposa) Fonseca and co-playwright Allen while Mariposa was held in the Security Housing Unit (SHU) of a California women’s prison. The play toured houses of worship and campuses from coast to coast, concluding with a performance pictured here in Washington, DC.
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