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As 2017 came to a close, our collective work of defending human dignity remained bold and clear, despite the challenges posed by a Trump Administration that poses mounting threats to human rights on every front. Federal and state-level activism at NRCAT is at an all-time high. Our deepest appreciation goes out to each and every one of the religious organizations, private foundations, and individuals who act through NRCAT to meet the challenge we now face head-on, together.

Rev. Ron Stief
Executive Director
National Religious Campaign Against Torture
A Moral Call to Oppose Torture of Detainees

2017 marked a year wherein NRCAT switched much of its advocacy to raising the issues of torture of detainees in Senate confirmation hearings of President Trump’s nominees. NRCAT generated more than 4,600 in-state phone calls from moderate and conservative Christians to the offices of 12 influential Senators during the nomination hearings for State Department, the Defense Department, the CIA, and the Department of Justice.

Tens of thousands of Christians signed a national petition calling on then-Congressperson Mike Pompeo to “follow the law and obey Christian morality” by opposing torture as Director of the CIA. The names of 4,500 Kansas Christians who signed the petition were delivered to Pompeo’s Wichita and DC offices two days prior to his hearing. The Christian Post published an op-ed by Rev. Ron Stief, *Torture Is a Denial of Jesus*, which was shared across 100 affiliates of the Christian Media Corporation, generating follow-up stories and radio interviews. A video story on Christian opposition to torture placed next to the op-ed received 200,000 views from CP’s largely conservative audience.

NRCAT led the faith community in an accountability campaign opposing the nomination of Steven Bradbury to be the General Counsel at the Department of Transportation. Mr. Bradbury was a key author of Bush-era legal memos authorizing torture, including memos re-authorizing torture after Congress had passed the Detainee Treatment Act—a law that was intended to end the torture program. Following a four month fight, Mr. Bradbury was narrowly confirmed, receiving only 50 votes and even losing the support of two Senators from his own party.

A Moral Call for Justice from the Grassroots

The heart and energy of NRCAT’s efforts to end torture remained most evident in the work of individual faith communities at the local and regional level. These efforts included local *Lifelines to Solitary* trainings, in collaboration with Solitary Watch, in which congregations were trained and resourced to correspond with individuals currently in solitary confinement and virtual reality experiences of solitary confinement at major religious conferences including the Islamic Circle of North America’s National Convention in Baltimore, the Unitarian Universalist Association’s General Assembly in New Orleans, the Disciples of Christ General Assembly in Indianapolis, and the Jewish Council for Public Affairs in Washington DC.

In Houston, Texas, NRCAT’s Rev. Ron Stief was joined by Dolores Canales of California Families Against Solitary Confinement to present at a three-day symposium, which was hosted by Rothko Chapel and the University of St. Thomas and explored human rights issues associated with the criminal justice system.

In Washington state, NRCAT co-sponsored a series of events with the Washington State Religious Campaign Against Torture to lift up the importance of the trials of Dr. Bruce Jessen and Dr. James Mitchell, the contractors who designed and implemented the Bush-era torture program for the CIA. The trial was settled out of court. These included standing-room only events at Gonzaga University School of Law in Spokane and the University of Washington Law School in Seattle, where NRCAT Executive Director Rev. Ron Stief spoke of the national grassroots opposition to torture that is building in the Trump era.

A Moral Call to Close Guantanamo

On January 11, 2017, the 15th anniversary of the opening of the detention center at Guantanamo Bay, NRCAT joined allies in a protest in front of the Supreme Court to call on all branches of government to close Guantanamo and end the illegal and immoral detention without trial of the prisoners held there.

Before they left office, both President Obama and President Bush declared that Guantanamo, an internationally recognized symbol of torture, should be closed. Throughout 2017, NRCAT mobilized communities of faith to make the case against Guantanamo and indefinite detention without trial to the Trump Administration. NRCAT faith leaders had a clear message in 2017 for the President: that detention at Guantanamo is not only wrong – but it prevents justice, for those detained and for those who have been victims of terrorism.

At the end of 2017, no one new had been sent to Guantanamo. Yet 41 people, including 5 who have already been cleared for release by the U.S. military and security agencies, still remained imprisoned in Guantanamo.
A Moral Call to End Solitary Confinement

NRCAT played a central role in the nationwide campaign to end solitary confinement, with state legislatures and grassroots efforts advancing from coast to coast. In 2017, Connecticut joined the growing list of states seeking legislation to confront the use of solitary confinement in its prisons. (See the NRCAT website for a full list of state updates.)

As a part of this campaign in Connecticut, the NRCAT solitary cell replica was displayed in the State Capitol building in Hartford. The replica cell was also displayed at the New Haven Free Library and the campus of Yale University. More than 500 people spent time in the solitary replica, including several Connecticut state legislators.

In New Jersey, the Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement (NJ-CAIC) continued to promote legislation that would effectively end the isolation of incarcerated people statewide, which they hope to pass and get signed by the Governor in 2018.

In New York in 2017, NRCAT’s staff expanded to include a full-time Campaign Organizer for the New York Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement (NY-CAIC). Faith communities in New York continued to grow support for passage of the Humane Alternative to Long-Term (HALT) Solitary Confinement Act in the New York State Legislature. NRCAT also deepened its staff capacity, adding staff and consultants in NJ, NY, CA and nationally who are formerly incarcerated and bring the wisdom of that experience to the work. At the national level, in 2017 NRCAT welcomed Mr. Johnny Perez to serve as the Director of NRCAT’s U.S. Prisons Program.

A Moral Call to Confront Drone Warfare

In 2017, President Trump increased the CIA’s authority to carry out drone strikes, expanded the areas that the U.S. considers active war zones, and allowed strikes outside of active war zones. These changes are already leading to an increase in civilian deaths and are causing long-term damage to many affected communities.

NRCAT actively opposed these changes, serving as convener of the Interfaith Working Group on Drone Warfare in Washington, DC. NRCAT organized faith community members to advocate on Capitol Hill for banning CIA drone strikes, mandating a government-sanctioned study of the long-term consequences of drone warfare, and requiring individual human responsibility for all strikes.

Working to educate members of the faith community about the U.S. government’s use of armed drones, NRCAT co-sponsored the Conference Against the Use of Drones in Warfare at Duke Divinity School in North Carolina. NRCAT also organized individual congregations to host film screenings on drone warfare produced by the Interfaith Network on Drone Warfare and organized and promoted a petition calling on legislators to restrict the use of lethal drones.

A Moral Call to Oppose Bigotry

NRCAT helped organize protests nationwide in response to all three versions of the Trump Administration’s Muslim Ban. NRCAT also joined interfaith partners throughout the year to advocate for raising the number of refugee admissions—a number that has been slashed by the Trump Administration to historic lows. Many refugees seeking entry to the U.S. are survivors of actual or threatened torture.

NRCAT also released a report and a survey instrument based on focus groups in 15 conservative southern evangelical churches on anti-Muslim bias. Tools for congregational outreach co-designed with the National Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good were developed and promoted, with over 10,000 downloads from a national mailing to evangelicals in the United States.
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