Dear Friends,

The year 2018 brought with it a host of harrowing headlines: migrating families separated at the southern U.S. border with Mexico, immigrant children held in for-profit detention centers, the 16th anniversary of the opening of the Guantanamo Bay detention center, draconian cuts in the numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers allowed entry into the U.S., a dramatic increase in the use of drone warfare, the on-going targeting of Muslim communities, and the criminalization of people of color.

In the face of these realities, the diverse faith communities that comprise the National Religious Campaign Against Torture expressed their faith through countless acts of Compassion Rising by speaking out and marching, advocating to legislators for just laws, praying with their feet, time and resources in acts of solidarity and public witness.

It is my great privilege to present to you, on behalf of the Board of Directors and staff of NRCAT, snapshots of these efforts in 2018. I trust that you will find inspiration in these stories of resilience and vision for a torture-free world.

Highlights of NRCAT’s impact in 2018 include:

- In January, NRCAT supporters held over 20 rallies, vigils, group prayers and other events around the country in opposition to indefinite detention at Guantanamo.
- No new detainees were transferred to the Guantanamo Bay detention center despite threats from the Trump Administration.
- NRCAT joined a coalition of organizations and movement leaders in the launch of a campaign to end the use of solitary confinement for all people, called “Unlock the Box”, infusing new organizing capacity to state campaigns nationwide.
- Bringing together 70 formerly incarcerated leaders, all of whom had firsthand experience of solitary confinement, NRCAT hosted trainings focused on legislative advocacy and effective media strategies.
- Along with our faith partners in Washington, DC, NRCAT educated Members of Congress and the public on the true cost of drone warfare.

Just as the sun rises each day signaling new possibility, we are rising together as people of faith to claim our voices and stand up for compassion and human rights, without exception.

Rev. Ron Stief
NRCAT Executive Director
A Moral Call to Close Guantanamo

During his 2018 State of the Union Address, President Trump ordered that Guantanamo be kept open, reversing President Obama’s order that it be closed. He ordered then-Secretary of Defense Mattis to carry out a 90-day review of U.S. detention policy to determine, among other things, whether new detainees ought to be sent to Guantanamo.

NRCAT mobilized to block the President from sending new detainees to Guantanamo. In January, NRCAT supporters held over 20 rallies, vigils, group prayers and other events around the country in opposition to indefinite detention at Guantanamo. NRCAT organized another series of events during Torture Awareness Month in June. These efforts were successful in 2018 in that President Trump did not send any new prisoners to Guantanamo, and, in fact, transferred one, Ahmed Muhammed Haza al Darbi, to Saudi Arabia.

Interfaith Opposition to Haspel

In the spring, NRCAT opposed President Trump’s nomination of Gina Haspel to be the new CIA Director. During the George W. Bush Administration, Haspel personally supervised the use of torture at a CIA black site and ordered the destruction of videotapes documenting torture.

More than 58,000 NRCAT supporters and other people of faith signed NRCAT’s petition in opposition to Haspel, and more than 700 people of faith called key Senators before the vote on her nomination. In Maine, 65 clergy signed a letter that was published in both major Maine newspapers calling on the Maine Senators to vote against Haspel. In addition, three national faith groups representing Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish communities, sent letters to the Senate in opposition.

Despite an outpouring of opposition from those who do not wish to see the U.S. return to torture, Gina Haspel was ultimately confirmed on a 54-45 vote. However, prior to being confirmed, Senators required her to publicly repudiate the torture program, which she did by stating that the “program is not one the CIA should have undertaken. The United States must be an example to the rest of the world, and I support that.”

Drones: A Moral Threat

As an interfaith organization, NRCAT believes that armed drones pose a new moral risk for our democracy. Drones allow U.S. leaders to order people killed without putting U.S. personnel at any direct physical risk, making it politically easier to use force to address perceived threats. In coordination with colleagues from a growing number of national denominations and faith groups who make up the Interfaith Working Group on Drone Warfare in Washington, DC, NRCAT has established three medium term goals to limit the use of armed drones.

First, we are working to ban the CIA from carrying out drone strikes. The CIA’s use of drone strikes effectively constitutes a secret war—one that the U.S. government doesn’t officially acknowledge, that has never been publicly debated, and that Congress did not specifically authorize. Secondly, NRCAT is urging Congress to investigate the long-term consequences of drone strikes—including the effects on targeted communities and on U.S. security. Third, we are demanding the government ensure that humans have meaningful responsibility for and authority over all drone strikes—no one should be targeted solely by a computer.

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT:
North Carolina Council of Churches

In the fall, NRCAT colleagues at the North Carolina Commission of Inquiry on Torture issued a report on its investigation into the role North Carolina-based Aero Contractors played in the CIA’s rendition flights, flights it used to transfer at least 49 detainees prisoners overseas to be tortured in CIA facilities and by foreign countries. The report details cases of mistaken identity, like Khaled El-Masri, who was tortured in the CIA’s “Salt Pit” black site.

The report shows what can be accomplished by a group of people of faith and conscience who dedicate themselves to exposing an unjust and illegal government program. NRCAT is supporting the Commission and our colleagues in the North Carolina Council of Churches and North Carolina Stop Torture Now in promoting the report and educating Americans about the CIA torture program by promoting educational events and by sharing the report with its national supporters.
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In 2018, NRCAT toured a solitary cell replica and a virtual reality experience of solitary confinement to more than 20 college campuses and religious conferences in support of statewide and national campaigns to end solitary. NRCAT national staff brought the VR to the 79th General Convention of The Episcopal Church held in Austin, Texas. As a result of NRCAT’s collaboration with Episcopal colleagues, the General Convention passed a resolution condemning solitary confinement as a form of torture and calling on all Episcopalians to work for its eradication. NRCAT also hosted the virtual reality experience of solitary at the Strengthening the Black Church for the 21st Century (SBC21) National Prison Summit on Mass Incarceration in Nashville.

In a series of collaborations with Public Square Media, we teamed up with the Center for Crime, Media, and Justice at the John Jay School of Criminal Justice to host Solitary Week, coinciding with a symposium for journalists from around the country along with leading experts, researchers, advocates and solitary survivors. NRCAT joined the Prisons and Justice Initiative at Georgetown University to host the virtual reality solitary experience and replica solitary cell which was visited by over 1,000 students, staff and faculty.

Prayer and Protest at Hutto

On July 8, NRCAT and Grassroots Leadership joined The Most Rev. Michael Curry, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church and more than 1,000 Episcopalians attending the 79th General Convention of The Episcopal Church, for a protest and prayer service outside the for-profit detention center, T. Don Hutto, in Taylor, Texas, bearing witness to the struggle of the 500 migrant women detained there, including women separated from their children.

Unlock the Box Campaign Launch

NRCAT was pleased to join in the launch of the Unlock the Box campaign, a coalition of organizations and movement leaders who are partnering with state and local campaigns across the United States to end the use of solitary confinement.

Unlock the Box supports education and advocacy efforts on the national, state, and local levels with the ambitious goal of ending solitary confinement in all US prisons, jails, detention facilities, and juvenile facilities to bring the United States into full compliance with the UN’s Mandela Rules within 10 years.

State Legislation on Solitary Advances

A growing number of campaigns to end solitary for adults and youth saw significant gains in 2018, with NRCAT and the faith community playing a pivotal role in this progress. State legislation in New York and New Jersey, drawing on the human rights standards promoted by the United Nations’ “Nelson Mandela Rules” which prohibit isolation beyond 15 days and ban it for the most vulnerable, served as a national model. After years of education, organizing, and advocacy, the NY State Assembly passed HALT by a resounding vote of 99-45. The New Jersey Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement supported the reintroduction of The Isolated Confinement Restriction Act. The first-hand stories of survivors played a critical role in the campaign through a newly formed Survivors Bureau. Faith community participation in the NJ-CAIC monthly membership meetings increased significantly throughout the year.

Equipping Those Directly Impacted to End Solitary

At pilot media trainings in 2018, NRCAT brought together 70 formerly incarcerated leaders from Maryland, New Jersey, New York, and Virginia, all of whom had firsthand experience of solitary confinement, and trained them on legislative advocacy and effective media strategies.
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