

## **Repairing the Brokenness: A Faithful Response to U.S.-Sponsored Torture**

### A NRCAT Video and Interfaith Discussion Guide

#### **Introduction**

Since January 2006, the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT), a coalition of more than 300 religious organizations, has worked to ensure that U.S.-sponsored torture ends forever. On January 22, 2009, the religious community's efforts were rewarded when President Obama issued an Executive Order halting torture. However, President Obama has declined to authorize a serious, comprehensive investigation of the torture practices in our nation's past, saying he prefers to look forward rather than backward.

Every few months, additional details about our nation's use of torture come to light. President Bush, in his memoir published in late 2010, stated that he ordered water-boarding and would do so again. Most experts agree that waterboarding is torture. Our nation has experienced much pain and is divided by these practices. These actions have diminished our reputation among many nations in the world. NRCAT is calling for a Commission of Inquiry to investigate U.S. torture policies and practices and to recommend safeguards to make sure that torture never happens again. We believe that our nation cannot move forward without a willingness to look back, acknowledge what has happened, and make up for our past mistakes.

The video "Repairing the Brokenness" includes perspectives from several faith leaders about repentance, redemption and healing the soul of our nation from the brokenness resulting from the use of torture. Within that context, the video addresses the need for accountability for U.S.-sponsored torture and provides information about NRCAT's call for a Commission of Inquiry, urging people of faith to join the campaign by signing our statement. To order a copy of the "Repairing the Brokenness" video or download it for free, go to [www.nrcat.org/repair](http://www.nrcat.org/repair).

The speakers on the video are: **Dr. Ingrid Mattson**, past president of the Islamic Society of North America; **Rabbi Rachel Kahn-Troster**, Director of Education and Outreach at Rabbis for Human Rights; **Father Drew Christiansen**, Editor-in-Chief of America Magazine; **Dr. George Hunsinger**, founder of NRCAT and professor at Princeton Theological Seminary; **Linda Gustitus**, president of NRCAT; and **Rev. Richard Cizik**, President of the New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good.

### **Suggestions for Using this Video**

This video is designed to be shown and discussed in congregations and religious organizations. It best lends itself to a small group discussion or an adult education setting. If your congregation has an adult class that meets weekly to address a variety of issues, you might consider asking if the video could be shown in that setting.

Below is a discussion guide for a one hour session that is appropriate for a variety of denominations and faith groups. Please feel free to adapt it according to the faith tradition of your own congregation or faith group.

This resource could also be used in:

- An older youth or college group
- A women's or men's organization
- A social ministry committee or meeting
- A prayer group
- An interfaith setting

### **Preparing for the Discussion**

We suggest that facilitators preview the video and read through the discussion guide to decide how you would like to present the material. Think through your own feelings and responses beforehand, so you are not surprised during the discussion. Feel free to incorporate your own thoughts, questions, and prayers into the session. There may be a variety of opinions expressed during the discussion, and openness and honesty should be encouraged.

Here is a quick preparation checklist:

- Advertise early and often about the upcoming discussion session within the congregation. Announce it in worship. Determine who will participate in leadership and reading of questions/meditations.
- Test the video with the equipment (DVD player and TV or Computer and Projector) you will be using for the session.
- Print NRCAT's Statement on a Commission of Inquiry, found in Appendix 2. You'll find a petition version of the statement, along with the latest list of heads of faith groups who have endorsed the statement and a variety of other resources, on our website: [www.nrcat.org/repair](http://www.nrcat.org/repair).
- Occasionally, participants will ask for the definition of torture that is being used. The definition from the Convention Against Torture, which is U.S. law, is included in Appendix 1.

### **Following the Discussion**

It would help NRCAT if you would send an email to [campaign@nrcat.org](mailto:campaign@nrcat.org) with a brief description of the discussion held in your congregation. Please include your name, the name of your congregation, the number of people attending, the date of the discussion, and anything else you would like to share about the discussion.

## Session Outline

### **Welcome and introductions** (5 minutes)

Open with prayer, if that is your tradition, and ask participants to introduce themselves as needed. Then introduce the video “Repairing the Brokenness: A Faithful Response to U.S.-Sponsored Torture” by saying something like:

Each of us comes to this discussion session on torture with many thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. We may have conflicting views. We ask that you keep an open mind to one another’s opinions during this session.

The purpose of this study is for us to discuss of the issue of U.S-sponsored torture through the lens of our faith, which teaches that each human being has inherent worth and dignity. We will specifically be exploring why our nation needs to come to terms with its use of torture and how a Commission of Inquiry can help us do that task.

### **Video Screening** (10 minutes)

Insert DVD and select “Play” from the main menu. The video will begin screening immediately.

### **Discussion** (40 minutes total)

[Depending on the size of the group, you may want to have the participants discuss one or more of these questions in pairs or threes, rather than as a large group.]

Now we’ll discuss some of the issues raised in this video.

1. In the video, we heard leaders from different religious traditions talking about torture. What do you believe your faith tells you about torture? (5 minutes)
2. All faiths have the basic teaching that human beings are created with dignity and worth, and some believe that human beings are created in the image of God. How does this concept inform our understanding of torture? (5 minutes)
3. Several of the religious leaders spoke about the importance of repentance and reconciliation in their own religious traditions. Rabbi Rachel Kahn-Troster reflected on the idea of collective responsibility for sins, quoting the well-known statement by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel that “some are guilty, but all are responsible.” Fr. Drew Christiansen shared a story of Pope John Paul II teaching that “the Church itself should ask forgiveness of God” and seek reconciliation with those who have been harmed. How do you understand

repentance? How does your faith tradition incorporate the idea of collective responsibility for sin or wrongdoing? (10 minutes)

4. Dr. Ingrid Mattson discussed the issue of veterans returning to the U.S. and dealing with the psychological trauma from participating in violence, particularly violence about which they feel some shame. She described some of the effects such trauma has had on the veterans, their families, and their communities. Do you agree with her that torture could have an even “deeper effect” on our society, as those who have witnessed or participated in torture return home to their families and communities? How might faith communities promote reconciliation in this situation and serve as sources of support and healing for those who have been traumatized by witnessing acts of torture? (5 minutes)
5. In your view, is there any danger to this country if we “just move on” without examining our role as a nation that has engaged in the widespread use of torture? Why or why not? (5 minutes)
6. The text at the end of the video identified three essential steps for repairing the brokenness from torture:
  - Uncover all the facts.
  - Acknowledge the immorality of our acts.
  - Vow to do whatever it takes to make sure that it will never happen again.

Linda Gustitus described NRCAT’s call for a government-sponsored Commission of Inquiry, which would help to accomplish these tasks, and the importance of having faith communities engaged in the process. What thoughts do you have about the importance of these three tasks? Do you believe there is a special role for the religious community in this process of holding our nation accountable for torture? (10 min)

**Distribution of the NRCAT statement on the Commission of Inquiry and Closing Prayer** (5 minutes)

Distribute copies of NRCAT’s statement on a Commission of Inquiry and ask those who wish to sign it to do so. Inform the participants that the statement will be sent to the White House and ask them how you might urge other members of the congregation to participate in this effort. Please send the statements with the collected names to:

National Religious Campaign Against Torture  
110 Maryland Ave. NE, Suite 502  
Washington, DC 20002.

End with a closing prayer or the way that your class typically closes its session.

## Additional Resources

As a facilitator, you may want to visit or encourage participants to visit [www.nrcat.org](http://www.nrcat.org), where there is more information about:

- **U.S. –Sponsored Torture:** [http://www.nrcat.org/post911\\_detainees](http://www.nrcat.org/post911_detainees)
- **Commission of Inquiry:** [www.nrcat.org/repair](http://www.nrcat.org/repair)
- **Statements by denominations and faith groups:** [www.nrcat.org/religious\\_statements](http://www.nrcat.org/religious_statements)
- **Information about NRCAT:** [www.nrcat.org/about](http://www.nrcat.org/about)

## Definition of Torture

NRCAT uses the definition of torture included in Article I of the U.N Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The Convention came into force on June 26, 1987, following ratification by the 20th nation. June 26th is now recognized as the UN International Day in Support of Torture Victims.

The Convention was signed by the U.S. in 1988 and ratified by the U.S. Congress in 1994, thereby becoming U.S. law.

Here is the definition of torture from Article I of the Convention:

*“For the purposes of this Convention, the term ‘torture’ means any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions.”*

The Convention against Torture also prohibits cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment which does not amount to torture.

## **U.S.-Sponsored Torture: A Call for a Commission of Inquiry**

The United States must never again engage in torture. Torture is immoral, illegal and counterproductive. It causes profound and lasting harm, especially to its victims but also to its perpetrators. It contradicts our nation's deepest values and corrupts the moral fabric of our society.

We call for an impartial, nonpartisan, and independent Commission of Inquiry. Its purpose should be to gather all the facts and make recommendations. It should ascertain the extent to which our interrogation practices have constituted torture and "cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment". Understanding the causes, nature and scope of U.S.-sponsored torture is essential for preventing it in the future and eliminating it from our system without loopholes. U.S. law will determine the extent of any criminal culpability.

As people of faith, we know that brokenness can be healed – both in individual lives and in the life of the nation. All religions believe that redemption is possible. Learning the truth can set us on a path toward national healing and renewal.

The United States must never again allow itself to be driven by blinding fears and bitter resentments in responding to national tragedy. The use of torture only serves to undermine our security in a dangerous world.

Nothing less than the soul of our nation is at stake in confronting U.S.-sponsored torture and completely renouncing its use. Let the U.S. reaffirm its values by establishing a Commission of Inquiry.