

National Religious Campaign Against Torture

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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PRESS RELEASE

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"BANNERS ACROSS AMERICA"

330 CONGREGATIONS DISPLAY ANTI-TORTURE BANNERS DURING JUNE -TORTURE AWARENESS MONTH

A Project of the National Religious Campaign Against Torture

Rabbi Rachel Kahn-Troster, the Director of Education and Outreach for Rabbis for Human Rights-North America has been inspired by the way that she has encountered anti-torture banners displayed on the exteriors of congregations during her daily journeys in Manhattan. "Whether it is walking by Riverside Church or Rutgers Presbyterian Church and seeing an anti-torture banner displayed at both of them, or seeing one in the sanctuary at B'nai Jeshurun Synagogue when I go to a *brit milah*, or looking up at the one at Shaare Zedek Synagogue when I enter Shabbat services, I am constantly reminded about the millions of people we are reaching with the interfaith message that torture is a moral issue."

Similarly, someone walking in Ann Arbor, Michigan will be impressed by the anti-torture banners displayed on the exterior of 13 congregations in that city.

Over 330 congregations displayed anti-torture banners during the month of June 2008 -Torture Awareness Month- in all 50 states and in Washington, DC - a project of the National Religious Campaign Against Torture. Most of the banners read "Torture is a Moral issue" or "Torture is Wrong". Banners produced by Rabbis for Human Rights - North America read, "Honor the Image of God: Stop Torture Now". Twenty-seven Jewish communities are displaying banners as are a number of Islamic Centers across the country.

"Banners Across America" is a story of 330 congregations. Each of those congregations educated themselves on the issue and decided, according to the way that each one makes decisions, that they would publicly display an anti-torture banner.

For instance, the Congregation Council at Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hartford, CT unanimously approved the purchase of a banner, which was displayed beginning June 1 over the main door at the front of the church. Last fall members of the congregation viewed the film "The Ghosts of Abu Ghraib," and a few others subsequently viewed "Taxi to the Dark Side." As a result, the congregation has been enthusiastic about hanging the banner.

Rev. Eva Reque Steege, the pastor of Grace Lutheran Church said, "We particularly liked the fact that the only space that would accommodate the banner was directly over the keystone of the door, which has a carving depicting the cross leaning into a grape vine."

Some of the congregations displaying banners shared their concerns with people in the community. The Tupelo Unitarian-Universalist in Tupelo, Mississippi walked through the streets of Tupelo carrying their banners.

Similarly, 35 people gathered around several of the banners of the Washington State Religious Campaign Against Torture on the steps of St. Mary's Catholic Church in Seattle. Seven speakers described why their faith led them to conclude that torture is always wrong. One of the speakers was from Argentina who was tortured there in the late 1970s. It was an important reminder of the urgency of ending U.S.-sponsored torture.

Many congregations report that the experience has been very positive. Rabbi Joseph Wolf of Havurah Shalom in Portland, Oregon reported, "I have heard from so many people around town, who have come up to me, saying, 'I'm so glad about that banner. It's great that your congregation is taking a stand against torture. I sense that it means an awful lot to many Jews to be unequivocal on the issue, in a time when there is a lot of willingness to compromise on who bears the image of God. It's nice to go public with the idea that we all do!'"

Rev. David Davies, pastor of Nassau Presbyterian Church in Princeton, NJ, in a newspaper interview, said that the banners only have generated positive reactions, with several people thanking him for the display. The banners have not drawn any complaints at his church.

"We feel strongly about joining our voices with people of all faiths who are speaking out on the issue," Rev. Davis said.

Yet not all of the responses to the banners have been supportive ones. The Naurashaun Presbyterian Church in Pearl River, NY showed the film "The Ghosts of Abu Ghraib" after worship on Sunday, June 22. There was good press coverage before the event and the film showing was well-attended. The banner and stories also attracted about half a dozen counter-demonstrators in front of the church on Sunday morning complete with American flags and camouflaged station wagon.

Six of the banners across the nation were vandalized or stolen. One of the congregations that had the banner vandalized was the Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church in Washington, DC. Cedar Lane's banner came about because of their 7th grade religious education class. It was their social justice project. They purchased the sign from the National Religious Campaign Against Torture with funds they raised selling sodas in the church lounge after worship.

Congregations have made several different choices about the future of the banner on their buildings. Some promised to display the banner in June, while others will keep displaying the banner publicly until U.S.-sponsored torture is ended, either by a Presidential executive order or through legislation.

Still others will display their banner on October 24 - November 16 during the period which includes World Community Day, Election Day, and Veterans' Day with a call to honor our country's values by stopping U.S.-sponsored torture and January 9 - March 1, 2009 urging the new President to issue an executive order that will ban U.S.-sponsored torture, as well as during the month of June 2009 - Torture Awareness Month.

The National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT) is a growing membership organization committed to ending U.S.-sponsored torture, and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Since its formation in January 2006, over 210 religious organizations have joined NRCAT, including representatives from the Roman Catholic, evangelical Christian, mainline Protestant, Unitarian, Orthodox Christian, Quaker, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh communities. The organization can be reached at 202-547-1920 or online at <http://www.tortureisamoralissue.org/>.

A list of the more than 330 congregations that are displaying banners, a collection of 120 photographs of congregations displaying banners and links to the 95 press stories on the banners can be found at http://www.nrcat.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=152&Itemid=151.

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